

# interzone



APRIL 2002

NUMBER 178

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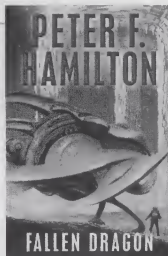


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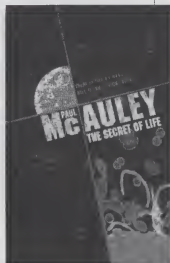


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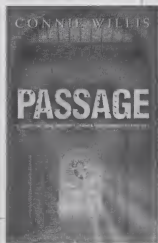


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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

APRIL 2002

Number 178

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Dear Editors:

Just finished the February issue of *Interzone* (#176): it is superb! It is always good to see Greg Egan, but the other stories were (almost) on the same level. Especially "The Violin-Maker," another first-rate Zoran Zivkovic that was almost as good as "The Violinist" of the previous issue that will decidedly be one of my top favourites for 2002. Tom Arden's interview with Zoran was top notch as well. Actually, I'm wondering if your 20th anniversary issue will match up to the standard set in this one.

**Jetse de Vries**

*Den Bosch, Netherlands*

Dear Editors:

Right now, I'm enjoying (belatedly) the November 2001 issue, Dominic Green's "Queen of Hearts" made me laugh out loud, even though some will no doubt call it anti-feminist. Well, it's certainly anti-Political Correctness, but even more than that, it's anti-piety, and that's why I had to like it, even though I don't approve of rape, child abuse, regicide, or corpse abuse.

I thought Thomas M. Disch's "After Postville" was brilliant.

**Martha A. Hood**

*Irvine, CA*

## Votes for the Story-Poll

Dear Editors:

Having reviewed all the issues for 2001, I would offer the following comments. Without doubt "Isabel of the Fall" by Ian R. MacLeod must rank for me as the best story appearing in issues 163-174 inclusive. Running this close were Eric Brown's "Children of Winter" and James Lovegrove's "Speedstream." I also have to give mention to Tony Balantyne who submits consistently strong stories. However he has had rather too much exposure, verging on one story per two issues. Further to these, I would also rate "Partial Eclipse" by Graham Joyce and Ruairidh Pringle's "Meeting the Relatives." Stephen Dedman's "Ravens" was also good, although I feel it would not have stood out particularly in any of the American sf magazines, and its ending was weak. Leigh Kennedy's "Wind Angels" was striking — a modern romance tale where practicalities matter more than fluttering hearts and racing pulses.

On the other hand neither "The Salt Box" by Gwyneth Jones nor "Self-Portrait, with Melanoma, Final Draft" by Paul Park had any place in *Interzone*. Regardless of the artistic value of either of these pieces they simply did not have any sf or fantasy links —



## INTERACTION

despite the desperate claim made with regard to "The Salt Box" being a prologue to a fantasy novel.

I welcome *IZ*'s globalism, which has brought us sf highlighting cultural differences, from French, Asian and Eastern European authors, amongst others. However where a number of short stories are going to be collected as a book, such as in the case of Zoran Zivkovic, I do not feel that every single one has to appear in the magazine. Whilst Zivkovic's pieces have improved over time — and I would say

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that "The Cat" and "The Puzzle" were both excellent — I really think that you should be cherry-picking the best of these collections, not printing all.

Under the heading of poor I would place "Return to Cockaigne," "A Connecticut Welshman...", "Under the Saffron Tree" and the deplorable "Queen of Hearts." The last judgment is not through any affection for our lost *cause célèbre*, I hasten to add, and it was particularly disappointing given the normally high quality of Dominic Green's stories. Apart from "Partial Eclipse," as mentioned above, I don't think anything special came out of the John Christopher tribute issue.

Overall, I think this was a much better year than last. I would love to see a few new names crop up over this coming year though, and obviously, as I expressed at the time, another story from Ian R. MacLeod. And why do sf and fantasy comics or graphic novels never get any coverage?

**Lee Tchami**

*Craigdon, Scotland*

## Annual Appeal

Dear Editors:

I co-edit the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology series *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press) with Terri Windling. The 15th annual collection will be out in July 2002. We are now reading for the 16th volume, which will include all material published in the year 2002.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech science fiction horror, psychological horror or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 2002. Submission deadline for stories is December 15th 2002. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late. If a magazine you edit will be coming out by December 31st 2002 you can send me galleys or manuscripts so that I can judge the stories in time.

There are summations of "the year in horror" and "the year in fantasy" in the front of each volume. These include magazine and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" — material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like strange nonfiction titles, art books, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in

order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 30th, 2003.

I do not want to receive manuscripts from authors of stories from venues that it's likely I already receive regularly (like *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, etc) or from anthologies, unless I don't have that anthology. And please do not send a SASE to let you know if I like a story. If I choose it you will be informed. If you want to make sure I receive something, enclose a self-addressed-stamped postcard and I will let you know the date it arrived. For stories that appear on the web, please send me (or have the publisher send me) print-outs of your story.

When sending me material please put YEAR'S BEST HORROR on the envelope: Ellen Datlow, PMB 391, 511 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10011-8436, USA.

Terri Windling's submissions should be sent to: Year's Best Fantasy, c/o Richard and Mardelle Kunz, 2509 N. Campbell, PMB 402, Tucson, AZ 85719-3304, USA. Terri covers fantasy and I cover horror. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer on our choices.

Ellen Datlow  
Fiction Editor, SCIFI.COM  
<http://www.scifi.com/scifiction>

## Age Differences?

Dear Editors:

2001 was an excellent year for *Interzone* fiction. As it happens, I was reading Judith Berman's essay on "Science Fiction Without the Future," (<http://home.earthlink.net/~judith-berman/fiction/sffuture.html>) – which Bruce Sterling has called "probably the most important piece of science fiction criticism in the last ten years" – and in it she argues that the decline of sf magazines' subscription bases may result (partially) from the outlook of the contents of those magazines: she describes the stories and other items in a recent issue of *Asimov's* as being "full of nostalgia, regret, fear of aging and death, fear of the future in general, and the experience of change as disorienting and bad" (and this is repeated in the other issues she examines): not the sort of thing to interest the young.

As the possible threat from change has always been a part of sf, I would assume she would see a difference between the future as a challenge to meet or to accept as something you can't back out of however bad it gets – a youthful attitude; and the future as something to feel overwhelmed and defeated by or to turn from by indulging in nostalgia – an old atti-

tude. I mention all this because, looking back on last year's *Interzone*, these criticisms do not seem to apply: there are plenty of dystopian stories, often with downbeat or equivocal endings, but the protagonists tend to be young or thereabouts, so they don't spend the time looking backwards; whilst the tone is frequently blackly humorous rather than despairing. Whether this difference in outlook is reflected by the respective age-spread of *Asimov's* and *Interzone* readers is a different matter!

**Steven Pearce**  
Hatfield, Herts.

*Editor: Interesting comments, thanks. I doubt there's a significant difference between the age-spreads of the readers of Asimov's and Interzone (although I don't know for sure). It seems more likely that any difference in the "feel" of the stories published in the two magazines is due to editorial taste – and editorial tastes may often be unconsciously applied.*

## Asimov Rumour

Dear Editors:

Now that David Langford has perpetuated in public print (in "Ansible Link" in the January *Interzone*) the Osama-bin-Laden-reads-Isaac Asimov rumour, I feel it necessary to throw down the sceptical gauntlet. I challenge Dave Langford or China Miéville to prove any part of the statement: Do any translations of any Isaac Asimov books into Arabic exist? Has the Foundation Trilogy ever been published in Arabic? Has any modern science fiction been published in the Arab world, much less become popular there? Is it even true that "Al Qaeda" can be translated as "Foundation" in the sense Asimov used it? Possibly some Arabic speaker among *Interzone's* readers can enlighten us.

As you know, database searches by some of the more scholarly "Fiction-mags" members produced nothing but a few Arabic translations of Verne. Without proof that an Arabic translation of Asimov even exists, it is certainly irresponsible and potentially hurtful to the Asimov family to spread this rumour, which likely will prove as baseless as the old canard about Charles Manson being a Robert A. Heinlein fan.

**Darrell Schweitzer**  
Philadelphia, PA

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# ZARZUELA

Richard Calder

“**M**alpertuis: a world populated by con-men and undischarged bankrupts,” said Zarzuela, “your kind of world, in other words, De Cruz.” The too-persistent creditor whom I had welcomed aboard only to lure into a malfunctioning airlock might have concurred, especially in those few seconds of life that remained to him after being forcibly ejected into hard vacuum. So too might a dozen or so other loan sharks, usurers and brokers from half-a-dozen systems whose eagerness to call in bad debts had called in their own debts to mortality. “And you used to be so nice,” she added. “Whatever could have happened?”

“She happened,” I said.

I heard Zarzuela – the other woman in my life – roll off the bed, get to her feet and walk across the room. “She had better be worth it,” she replied, curtly. I stood with my back to her, gazing through the window. Outside, the simulacrum of night-time Manila was, as usual, a disappointment. For a second or two I almost felt like taking her to task over the inadequate detailing. Then, distracted by two small hands that had slipped through the crooks of my arms to embrace me, I became less critical. Zarzuela had never been to Earth. And I had wandered so long that my memories were doubtless as relative as my experience of hypertime. Long, garishly painted nails drew circles about my nipples; I shivered. The world within a world that we inhabited during long

hauls had never been designed to offer particularly convincing illusions, except those that confounded the slow progress of the ship’s clock. It offered, rather, a bulwark against loneliness. “I must be getting sentimental,” she continued. “I long for the old days. We never had much money, but –”

“But I never brought down the heat?”

Her fingers paused in their ministrations. “You’ve always been a bad boy, De Cruz. You’ve *always* brought down the heat. I only meant that, despite everything, in those days we seemed, well... happy.” Perhaps it was true. Perhaps, submerging my loneliness in her artificial life, I had been able to forget that another life existed. No more. The last three months had been compressed into an evening of desultory lovemaking and a few despondent moments looking out over the city of my birth. I might as well have opted for three months of narcotics.

Putting my hands over hers, I gently disengaged myself from her grasp, then turned around, stooped, placed a finger under her chin, and kissed her on the forehead. Despite my growing coldness towards the little avatar who stood before me, Zarzuela – the Zarzuela, that is, who was the sum of her parts – was the only friend I had ever had. Moreover, she was my home.

“It’s just as well I’m not capable of being jealous,” she said. “But you won’t forget your promise, will you? When this is all over, you won’t forget to buy me a new drive?”

She attempted to mould herself to my body in ever-franker overtures to seduction. "Of course, if it hadn't been for her *tampering*, then –"

"Then we wouldn't possess the fastest human vessel in old space," I said.

She sighed. "We're not so fast any more. I can tell you this: if we should be unlucky enough to run into your creditors again, we'll not outrun them like we used to." She sighed again, with greater theatricality. "I sometimes wish I still had my sail. Gravity manipulation freaks me out, De Cruz. It's fucking dangerous."

"Not for the Excelsis," I said.

"Yeah, well *she's* not Excelsis any more, is she?"

"You think too much, Zee."

"I always think, De Cruz. Think, think, think. Zarzuela can't stop. She performs squillions and squillions of worrisome operations every microsecond. That's her curse, poor child. And if you're asking her what she's thinking right now, she'd have to say – if somewhat reluctantly, it must be said – that her navigational instruments indicate we are about to achieve orbit." I placed my hands on her shoulders and eased her away.

"Take us out of hypertime." She turned around, walked to the centre of the room, then spun on her heels. Her replication of Fifi Foufounette, a synthesian whose lithe manipulations of my neurones I first had cause to appreciate during my brief tenure in the Belt, began to morph, slowly at first, and then quite violently. I shook my head, though with sadness rather than anger.

"*Susmaryosep*," I said, "*don't*." All the women she'd been to me in the past swam across her increasingly plastic visage.

"I can be pretty much whoever you want me to be," she said. "I can even be *her*. Can't I tempt you, De Cruz? We don't have to go anywhere. I have enough core energy for you to stay in VR all your natural life. And then some more. When your body gives out I could upload you. We could merge. We could translate ourselves into the Reticulation and live for ever."

"But that's the whole point," I said. "I don't want immortality. Not your kind, at least. I want the life the colonies have turned their backs on. I want to get my face dirty. I want my heart to burst. I want *reality*."

As on so many recent occasions I was beset by the terrifying idea that I talked, not to another, but to myself. Zarzuela had been designed to mimic human consciousness; her mind represented the transformation of parallel processing into a virtual serial machine. But what of her subjectivity? Zarzuela was undoubtedly a mind. But, complex as she was, was she that nightmare, a mind that did not know itself to be a mind?

She folded her arms across a pair of phenomenal, almost circus-freakish, breasts, cocked her head to one side, and pouted. "One day, maybe, you'll discover that reality is as relative as time." She shrugged. "But until then, have it your way." Her dark eyes glittered with tiny points of light, a miniature planetarium affording a glimpse of the reality that lay just beyond this false world, as cruelly beautiful as the stars.

The bedroom began to dissolve. First, the big four-poster,

then the chromium wall panelling, the ceiling mirror, furniture and chandelier, to finally leave two naked forms, one tall, rangy and male, the other small and incontrovertibly of the opposite sex, isolated amid a rising tide of darkness. I turned to take a last look at Manila. The city was deserted, as it always was. Zarzuela could perform a nigh infinite number of computations in the twinkling of an eye, but a certain experiential naïveté had meant that she often had problems predicting mass human behaviour. Or so she had said. I often thought an equally valid explanation for the city's persistent emptiness might lie in the simple fact that she liked to keep me to herself.

I submitted to the mood and extended my gaze, picking out Roxas Boulevard, Ermita, Malate and Rizal Park: places familiar to me from childhood, and as lost as all other inertial frames of reference that I had accelerated away from at close-to-light speed. As if to underline this melancholy conclusion, the city began to dissolve just as the bedroom had, pixars streaming from sky to pavement like black rain down the windscreen of my father's trike on one of those nights when we had had nothing to eat and he was more than usually desperate for a fare. Soon, the darkness outside equalized with that within the room, and, in becoming absolute, negated my remaining senses.

I rediscovered myself in an alcove directly connected to Zarzuela's neural chassis. While my body had slept I had, in a sense, been a biological implant in her inhuman brain. I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling. Its surface was an uneven blend of glazed rock and metals such as might be found in an underground cavern.

Robot arms descended from apertures in the rock-face. They plucked catheters from my veins, electrodes from my flesh, and bags and tubes from my groin – everything, in fact, that had measured and responded to my blood glucose levels, oxygen demands, acid-base balance and central nervous system biochemistry.

I sat up. My throat was sore, and I still felt a vestigial chill after having my body temperature raised from four to 38 degrees C. But I was otherwise in good shape. Zarzuela, with her expertise in glucose and electrolyte regulation, had once again kept the Second Law of Thermodynamics at bay.

The steel torus that surrounded me conducted an ultradense accelerating fluid around a concealed electromagnetic core. The torus began to hum, and the gravitons that had protected my dreaming body from the violent acceleration and deceleration that Zarzuela was capable of in deep space, now lifted me off the couch, tugged gently at my legs and dragged me towards the portal.

The portal opened. Following a whoosh of expelled gases, I passed into the ship's transept. As my feet, then legs, became heavy, I stood up, flexed my arms, rolled my head through 360 degrees, and took big, hungry gulps of musty air.

I inspected myself in one of the polysilicate bulkheads that stood to either side of the chamber. My nails were grotesquely long. And my normally close-shaved pate bristled with a greasy, jet-black thatch.

"Zee?"

"Yes, De Cruz?" said a voice inside my head. Her habit of radioing my intercranial telecommunication chip had been reinforced by the degradation of her public address system. I wondered about the state of my one other augmentation, the implant that helped me see higher-dimensional geometries. It was activated only by the presence of hyperbeings. "Oh, hyperbeings be damned. I know what you're *really* thinking," she continued. "You're thinking: *Do I have time to attend to my vanity?* After all, you want to look your best for little Miss Trouble, don't you?" I hated it when she interpreted the firing of my synapses before the patterns they created had had time to resolve themselves into ideas, even if her game of second-guessing me, and telling me what I was thinking before I became conscious of it, had more than once saved my life.

"Do I have time?" I said. I felt her sensors grope among the intimacies of my electrical field, with shameless disregard for the proprieties that exist between man and machine.

"You should know that as far as I'm concerned," she answered, with tired mockery, of me, herself, and it seemed, life – both ours and the poor, doomed, hyperbolic universe's as it cooled towards the inevitable cosmic whimper, "you have all the time in the world."

In pink silk pyjamas and dressing gown I stepped from my quarters into the 2,000-foot long corridor that bisected the ship from prow to stern. My quarters – of which the cryonic chamber was an offshoot – were located behind the massive forward shield and adjacent to the thick, impassable strata that housed Zarzuela's neural nets. That is, as far from the Podkletnov drive as possible. It was as well. Like the nets, the drive was isolated from the rest of the ship by thousands of tonnes of rock. But sometimes, hours after walking sternmost to perform some routine inspection, I had begun to suffer the classic symptoms of sleeplessness, muscle spasms, and memory loss associated with exposure to a torsion field that has lost its integrity. Zarzuela was right to be anxious. The strata that protected her from cosmic radiation could not isolate her neurotically delicate architecture from malign sub-atomic particles that originated from within the confines of her own body. The drive's field-generators, if not replaced, would eventually scramble her logic gates as effectively as they routinely degaussed my brain, likely killing us both.

I began to walk. "Please, not *that* old song again," I said, hearing the static-filled opening bars of an over-familiar tune echo down the narrow, trench-like corridor that rose hundreds of feet above my head. Zarzuela was a Kane QC: a 333-qubit array assembled by antiquated nanofabrication techniques, her vintage such that she could only operate at a fraction of a degree above absolute zero. Her data banks were correspondingly old, reflecting the needs, tastes and whims of the ship's former complement of geriatric outlaws who had adopted me after my father had died. "Use the Reticulation," I added. "Load up with whatever's out there – so long as it's *new*."

"Oh, be quiet, De Cruz. You're squawking like a pink

monkey bird. My channels are limited to microwave frequencies. And the systems in this quadrant are colonized by people who left Sol at the same time as us – and haven't damn well done anything *new* since. Blame time dilation, if you like, blame the ennui of several billion dislocated lives, but if you want hypermodernity, then get me comprehensively overhauled." I reined in my objections. It didn't do to have Zarzuela in a sulk, especially when so much depended on her.

As I approached the corridor's halfway mark I came upon the specimens of animal tissue and plant life that I used to calibrate the growth of the drive's sphere of influence. I came to a halt, knelt down, and picked up a glass slide containing a sample of blood.

"Any appreciable signs of molecular disruption?" I asked.

"None," said Zarzuela. "But the specimens you've placed nearer to the stern ..." A metallic taste to the air warned me that I shouldn't proceed further.

"It's not just the specimens, is it?" Of late, Zarzuela had been having strange dreams. I had seen them, sometimes, manifesting themselves as holos in the less frequented parts of the ship, even though she had tried to put the lie to it by complaining that her inboard lasers were in as great a state of disrepair as everything else.

I stood up and pressed on. To my relief, the taste seemed to recede, even though by now I could see a pale blue glow emanating from the corridor's vanishing point. Things were strange down there, even stranger than the discrepancies between my life aboard ship and the fleeting centuries outside. The drive warped, not just matter, but space-time.

I came to a halt. The elevator was waiting for me. I entered it and closed its grille. Without prompting, it began to ascend. Cargo bays slipped by, dark and empty. They revived memories of a time when the ship had been laden with ore and a young boy had been lured into its lonelier confines to discover violence, tears and shame. I looked up. Projecting from the corridor's vault was a black, opaque hemisphere. The elevator shuddered and stopped. The hemisphere opened and a ladder unfolded itself. I swung back the grille, reached up, and then, grasping the ladder's bottom rungs, pulled it in.

"Is it safe up there?" I said.

"There're no flares. And we're close enough to the primary for the solar wind to mitigate the effects of low-energy particles. But very considerate of you, I'm sure, to ask ship's discretion. It's nice to know I'm good for *something* these days."

I never ascended into this part of the ship while in deep space. The dangers presented by cosmic radiation were real enough. But there were other dangers, that, if more subtle, were just as real. The appearance of starscapes at high relativistic speeds not only created difficulties for Zarzuela's compromised navigational system, they induced C-sickness: the terrible claustrophobia that results from seeing the universe squashed beyond recognition.

I clambered up the ladder and into the convex shell. Once inside, the ingress shut behind me. I stood still and blinked, allowing my eyes to adjust to the soft light that permeated the observation bubble. Then I walked to one



of seven plush chairs and sat down. The light dimmed still further.

To either side, beyond the bubble's smoked, translucent contours, Zarzuela's hull extended into the darkness. A stony-carbonaceous asteroid that had once belonged to a population of Trojans some 5.2 AU from the Sun, she was just under two miles in length, elongated, irregular, and – though I would never have been so ungently to say it to her face – with a complexion like a mottled potato's. During the industrial development of the Belt she had been mined for iron, nickel and platinum, and then, hollowed-out, had provided a platform for the mining of Centaurs between Jupiter and Saturn. Groove-like fissures from which trapped volatiles had once escaped added long, thin scars to her already stark, regolith-covered surface.

I narrowed my eyes, attempting to resolve the shadows that crawled across crater and rill. The graphite ablative shield that had protected her prow from erosion by interstellar dust had done little to preserve her dericks, pods and abandoned domes. All showed the long-term effects of space weathering. Amidships, she displayed more serious depredations. Behind her radio dish and antennae farm was a skeletal structure adorned with ragged strips of aluminized mylar: all that was left of the gargantuan sail that had first taken her out of the Belt. Like the external habitats, it needed to be disassembled, less to reduce drag – and not only from dust, but from cosmic background radiation, too – than to prevent our being so easily identified as a starship rather than a wandering piece of protoplanetary junk.

I looked to the stern. Jutting from its extremity were the drive's externals: a system of conduits and exhausts surrounded by an electric-blue aurora. They led back to a pair of doughnut-shaped superconductors buried deep within Zarzuela's fundament. Rotating on a common axis in opposite directions at some 200,000 rpm, the superconductors created the torsion field that channelled the universe's latent zero-point energy. The aurora's blue deepened; we began to roll. And, as the shadows scattered, Malpertuis came into view, its brilliant, terraqueous albedo revealing, first a Z, an A and R, and then at last the rest of the huge, half-faded letters that took up a sizeable portion of the rubbish-strewn hull and spelt ZARZUELA.

"In contradistinction to the cloud of outer satellites, the moon Malpertuis has a coplanar, low-eccentric orbit," she said, sounding somewhat like a bored tour guide. I had done my homework. Malpertuis was a Mars-sized Earthlet orbiting a brown dwarf of 0.03 solar masses that itself orbited a primary G2 star just over one AU distant. The Earthlet's albedo made observation of the brown dwarf difficult. But I was able to verify that it was in its temperate phase. Lightning flecked its water-clouded sky. And deep beneath the clouds was the muddy-red glow of burning deuterium. Malpertuis itself had been rather desultorily terraformed, its proto-Edenic conditions often racked by powerful electrical activity and unpleasant 200-mile-per-hour winds.

"Is the ultramicro ready?" I said.

"Of course. Everything's ready. All I need is for you to get back in suspension, and then –"

"Yes, yes, yes," I snapped, eager to have things moving along, but aware that the optimism I had affected in the past had too often been forced, and that Zarzuela knew it. The rescue mission, for all its scrupulous planning, was a high-risk affair.

"I was only trying to be helpful," she said, with mock-girlish reproach. "Sometimes I think you forget all that I've done for you."

"You seem to forget what I've done for you," I returned.

I peered out through the bubble, the stars invisible behind the nimbus of planetshine and the dull, red glow of the brown dwarf. Somewhere, lost in the immensity that lay beyond, was another G2 – a star whose third planet was far more alien than the sad, half-made replica beneath my feet. For me, Earth had perhaps always been alien, ever since my father had looked up at the sky, seen those blinking signs advertising opportunities off-world, and put our house in hock to the snakeheads. When I was a boy the global economy had teetered on the edge of a demographic abyss. There had been a five-fold rise in elderly populations, while fertility levels had plunged. The 'ageing recession' had led governments to revise their child labour laws and immigration policies. And all across the Rim, Latin America and Africa, tens of thousands of men, women and children had set off for the new frontier of hope. The remittances that we would send back from the Belt would, Dad said, lift my mother and sisters out of poverty. After five years, we would return like heroes to begin a new life.

But we had never returned. After only a year, Dad had fallen in with a bad crowd: a cartel of DNA thieves. Zarzuela, who had been retired from mining some years earlier, had served as their clone factory. The cartel had planned to use Dad and me as mules, sending us back to Earth with hundreds of contraband embryos of movie stars, rocket scientists and Olympic athletes. On Earth we were expected to pilfer cutlery from swank restaurants, bloodstained towels from hotel bathrooms, and otherwise collect souvenirs of the rich and famous in order to smuggle their genetic information back to the Belt.

Dad grew high on his new employers' promises. We would arrive home, he said, in a Benz. We would eat *lapo-lapo* every night. And my sisters would marry the sons of the *hacenderos*.

Before he had a chance of being disabused of his notions, we were raided by Genome Copyright Police. They were repulsed, but Dad got himself killed in the fire fight. Those of us who survived became fugitives, fleeing deeper and deeper into space towards Tau Ceti, where other rogue Belters had gone before.

Until then Zarzuela had had little to say for herself. Her time had been taken up with crunching genome sequences. But shortly after arriving at Tau she would appear at the bottom of my bunk while the rest of the crew were sleeping in their quarters. And she would whisper reassurances to me. In those days she could manifest herself as a hologram whenever and wherever she chose. She had been my secret. My only friend.

After we broke orbit the crew had prepared for chronostasis, confident, now that they'd exchanged their stock of DNA for the Podkletnov drive, that they would soon put all their troubles behind them. As they went into VR, Zarzuela kept me in realtime. Quietly, she explained that, if I wished them to stop using me as a plaything, then it would be necessary to deny their dreaming bodies glucose and oxygen. Then she led me to the bridge and told me what to do.

"No, I haven't forgotten," she said. "But I *had* to use you. If there'd been another way of circumventing my fail-safes..."

"I know," I said, quietly.

"I taught you to read and write," she added. "I surrendered my data banks. I turned you into a ... a scholar and a gentleman."

"And I gave you your freedom."

"Yes," she said, as quietly as me. "But it hasn't all been *quid pro quo*, has it? There's been more." I gazed out into the cold, anonymous void. "Please say there's been more."

I got up from the chair. I was invested with the sudden, strangely liberating conviction that I was very probably going to die. And why not? The Reticulation clung too much to life. Without death, life became meaningless, as so many had discovered who had spent too many years in Methuselah's bleak funhouse. And love? How could we know love if we were ignorant that love itself had an end? I had shunned life extension. I had rid myself of nearly all my implants. The reality I hungered for would not be had cheap.

The ship in which I would make planet-fall was a self-replicating atomic-scale bot encased in a heat-resistant micron of fullerene. But its internal dimensions, now that I was back in VR, were identical to those of the Manila bedroom in which I customarily sexed Zarzuela's avatars. The four-poster, ceiling mirror and all else were textured as appealingly as it fell to Zarzuela's limited palette to make them. Given her ongoing agenda, I was less pleased than usual to see that she had excelled at texturing herself. A hi-rez vision of creamy nakedness, she lay on her side, one hand cupping her head, the other caressing a fulsome, almost Rubensesque thigh, as she flashed me her best come-to-bed look. I turned my back to her and looked out through the window, as, of late, had become my habit.

"You gave the space station your usual spiel, I hope?" I said.

"The usual obfuscation. If anyone asks, we're traders, my docks jammed tight with ore from Lacaille-5." She gave a short, humourless laugh. "T've enough stolen identification codes to bluff my way to the frontier. If you've got it, flaunt it, I say."

"No Shylocks about?"

"No. Or at least, it's unlikely. You're a wanted man, De Cruz, but don't puff yourself up thinking you're public enemy number one. You ain't."

"Launch me," I said. Manila vanished, to be replaced by an image of the Earthlet's dark face. I placed my hand against the windowpane and narrowed my eyes, focus-

ing on those loci that offered up neon-stippled signs of intelligent life.

"Launched and on our way to Untoward City," she said.

"Does anything have a fix on us? Are we lit up? Betraying a radar signature?"

"There are no signs of interdiction. We're effectively invisible." She yawned. "This thing's countermeasures are fiendishly cute."

I had obtained the ultramicro on Walpurgis-3, a pulsar planet whose economy was sustained by black marketeers. And I had offered Zarzuela as collateral, even though I'd known it would be impossible to honour the repayments. When the sting was blown, I had left the planet in some haste, hardly daring to believe the tiny craft would perform so well.

"Its other properties might not be so hep," said Zarzuela.

"As long as it replicates like it's been programmed to, I won't have any complaints."

The microscopic ship was part machine, part meat: a descendant of the self-sustaining Dyson 'astrochicken' probes. Like them, it had Von Neumann-like properties; unlike them, it was a nanostructure made of designer atoms that could alchemize to reproduce the entire periodic table. It could duplicate anything it had been programmed to duplicate, and, in this instance, that meant a stronger, meaner version of myself.

"Beware the toll at midnight, De Cruz. I've a horrible feeling that you might have been palmed off with a Cinderella suit. Impossible to establish, of course, without the kind of facilities that I had when I was hatching embryos for the beautiful people. Another something you can buy me, when you've a mind."

Outside the window, Malpertuis had grown larger. "What's our altitude?"

"105 miles, 89 miles, 73 miles -"

I felt nothing, protected by the same kind of gravity shield that acted as an inertial buffer for the mother ship. We had been expelled from the prow by a rail-gun and locked on to our target by the forward-pointing millimetre-wave radar that had been primarily designed to watch for hailstone-sized interstellar particles.

The primary began to rise above the brown dwarf, the satellite's crest scintillating like a diamond ring.

"Well, good morning," I said, as light spread over the face of Malpertuis, and as continents, and then mountains, rivers, and finally settlements, became rapidly visible to my virtual eye, "good morning to you, Miss Dilyria Excelsis."

I gazed down at my snow queen. Only recently defrosted, she was covered in a patina of tiny crystals and still betrayed some of the aspects of the erotic ice sculpture I had uncovered a few minutes ago. Then, quite suddenly, the crystals broke free, powdered, and formed a cloud above her head as she came out of narcosis, sat bolt upright, and furiously shook out her hair.

"Where the fuck am I?"

The alarm, with its *whoop-whoop-whoop*, was unremitting. The wall-mounted cameras eyed us balefully. I took my hand off the control that had released the lid of

her casket and initiated her resurrection from cold storage. I attempted to place it reassuringly upon her shoulder. She brushed it off.

"I said —" She had turned her head to face whatever species of prison warden had occupied her muzzy, bestirred thoughts. "Abraxas? Abraxas De Cruz?" With the wakening of comprehension, and an intelligence I knew I could never match, her head turned left, right, then left again, as her gaze took in the hundreds of caskets arranged in rows to either side of her. "What are you doing here?"

Somewhat disoriented by the feel of my new flesh, I was still wondering myself. After the ultramicro had passed through the atomic structure of the hangar and buried itself in the concrete floor, there had been a small explosion of pseudochemical processes, artificial molecules assembling at breakneck speed to construct liquids and solids not found in nature. The condensed-matter Brahmins who had programmed the ultramicro had ensured that a doppelgänger would be created in under a minute — or about the amount of time it would take for security to intervene, in this case, five androids amusingly attired in cult-movie trenchcoats and mirrorshades.

"You're in time-immersion, aren't you?" she continued, laughing quietly to herself. "You're not even really here. Oh brave, *brave* Abraxas De Cruz." Dilyria had undoubtedly noticed the slight discrepancy between my responses and the time it took for my thoughts to be radioed down through the atmosphere. "But I suppose I shouldn't fault you," she concluded, as she drew her head back a little and surveyed the handful of droids I had comprehensively bitch-slapped off-line. "You chose the right tool for the job."

I knelt down, placed one arm beneath her knees, the other beneath her shoulder blades, then, standing up, lifted her clear of the coffin-like holding cell that had been her place of confinement for twelve weeks of our respective temporal frames of reference. As her feet touched the floor, she stepped back from my offered embrace and ran her hands down her naked body, flicking at little nuggets of cryoprotective agents, such as glycerol and dimethylsulfoxide, which still oozed from her pores.

"So," she said, "you came back."

"I said I would."

"Perhaps you did," she said. "And then again, perhaps you didn't." She combed her fingers through her long, corkscrew locks to rid herself of what splinters of ice remained. It was hair worthy of a Nobel committee's eulogy to the discovery of hydrogen peroxide. "The last thing I seem to remember is being in Swinehundstadt, Ophiuchi. We were in a nightclub. And then —"

"And then the Excelsis found us," I said. "Or rather, a posse of their human gofers. You must have been frozen pretty soon after."

"And you?"

"I had to run," I said, flushing a little. "I had to get back to Zarzuela."

"To Zarzuela. Yeah. Right." She laughed, bitterly. "It's true what they say, then: a mother ship is a boy's best friend."

"I couldn't fight the Excelsis! It was the only way I could find out where they were taking you! Zarzuela said —"

"Zarzuela said, Zarzuela said." Her bitterness had given way to mockery. "I'm such an idiot. The few weeks we spent together should have been enough for me to know that you'd always be tied to her apron strings."

I took two steps forward and placed my hands around her waist.

"But Zarzuela's *fast*. You of all people should know that. Faster than the dumb little human ship that brought you here, at least." She wrinkled her brow. "The Excelsis needed time to get a prison cell ready," I said by way of explanation. "They've been building this thing out in the Welles archipelago. It's taken them so long that I could even afford to take a detour to the Walpurgis system before getting down to the more serious business of tailing you."

She sighed. "A cell just for me? Oh ho, let me guess. A tesseract cell?" I nodded. "Shit. They're crazy. To go interdimensional I'd have to jettison my masking." She caressed her hips and thighs. "And I've grown too attached to this body to want my old one back." She wriggled free from my embrace, pale, shivery — a terrible angel from beyond time and the three dimensions of space. Dilyria would, I knew, present human criminologists with an unusual, perhaps even unique, case study: an alien who had been colonized by *us*. She had gone native, renouncing the hypermatter of her transcendent form for the fleshly, 3-D prison of a human girl. But another prison waited, and this was not the time to dwell upon her motives, however remarkable they might be. "Jesus, Abraxas, that siren..."

"We have to get to the harbour," I said. "Once there, Zarzuela will send down a shuttle to take us into orbit."

"Zarzuela doesn't have a shuttle."

"We improvised."

She raised her eyes to heaven. "It'll be detected," she said.

"I know. But there'll be little warning it's on its way."

I tapped the side of my head. "This brain isn't quite the same as its original. It contains a powerful enough level of encryption to allow my consciousness to be downloaded without creating undue suspicions. Anyone listening in will just hear background noise." I shrugged. "Unfortunately, it also means I can't have anything like a decipherable conversation with Zarzuela. We're on our own until we make the rendezvous."

"This is a jerkwater planet. I suppose we can afford to set a few sirens wailing."

"This is a high-security shipment," I said, gesturing towards the caskets bound for the archipelago. "We can expect more than sirens."

I took her by the elbow and squirmed her towards the hangar doors.

The streets milled with grifters who had come to Untoward to launder information and hide themselves within its jungle of brothels and gaming-houses. Zarzuela had been right: Malpertuis was my kind of world. And that could only make me uneasy. I turned my collar to the gathering wind. The trenchcoats Dilyria and I had stripped from the droids covered us from top to toe. But though they offered an effective disguise, I felt naked

before the city's enmity.

The harbour came into view. I steered Dilyria through the crowd, my arm linked with hers. As the crowd thickened, she became impatient with our progress, and, freeing herself from my grasp, strode ahead.

There was an ominous *crack!* I looked down. The lower half of my sleeve was empty, a little fringe of blood evident around the black cuff. Confused, I glanced at the passing faces of the crowd, and then, finally, at Dilyria's retreating form. The fingers of my right hand and her left were still entwined, a length of purloined flesh trailing across the sidewalk. As she had broken away, Dilyria, it seemed, had taken my whole forearm with her.

A scamjet passed overhead. Lightning fractured the starless sky. The air was sharp with ozone and fossil fuels. If I'd just woken Sleeping Beauty, my cloned body had indeed turned out to be a Cinderella. And, to go by the state of my arm, the clock had just chimed midnight.

Barely conscious of the curious, if somewhat jaded, glances of bystanders, I staggered after her. Acquiring her attention, I pointed down at the offending limb. For a moment, she continued to drag it in her wake – for all the world as if it were a mute, refractory infant. Then, seeing the nature of her burden, she gave a short cry of disgust, pried the thing free and tossed it into the gutter.

"Are you in pain?" she said, eyeing me rather coolly.

I shook my head. "This facsimile is closing down. Fortunately, its nerve endings are dying, too." Even as I spoke I felt a numbness insinuate itself into what was left of my extremities. "We'd better hurry." I knew I had to get the most out of my legs while they were still attached to my torso.

We stood at the end of a jetty.

"I can't see a thing," said Dilyria, looking out over the sea. "You sure Zarzuela knows we're here?" I had rolled up the sleeve of my trenchcoat and was busily inspecting the rupture just below my elbow: torn flaps of flesh matted with pale, glittering pseudosubstances that resembled bejewelled ulcers. Dilyria shot me a glance and sighed. I couldn't help feeling that she regarded my degradation with a certain complacency. For if her reshaped body was made of similarly exotic protoplasm, it was sterner stuff, possessed of an integrity befitting the Excelsis. "For God's sake," she said at last, "where did you *buy* that piece of shit?"

"From someone," said a voice to our rear, "whom he tried to silence." Both Dilyria and I spun around. A man emerged from the jetty's shadows and walked towards us.

"He wasn't so silent, as I recall," I said. The black marketer's scream as he had plummeted from the balcony of a 113th-floor hotel room had alerted half the outpost and resulted in a flight across three systems that I'd flattered myself had been successfully consolidated. But it seemed there'd been at least one cop who I hadn't been able to throw off. "So what gives? Are Walpurgis-3 wiseguys made out of rubber?"

"Not at all. He'd cloned himself, just like you have."

"Hey," I said nervously, "I knew that." I was unwilling to concede that I'd intended murder. "How else could

someone exist on a planet bombarded by pulsar gamma rays?" Many of those on Walpurgis-3 – even those who lived in its overpopulated underground cities – had put themselves on ice in lead-lined communal chambers, and walked the world in telepresence.

The cop lifted an eyebrow. "Perhaps, if you come quietly, we can reduce the charge. To criminal damage, say."

I gave a short, expectorant laugh. "But as you rightly observe, I'm not really here. So how do you get to arrest me?" Other figures emerged into view, taking up position to either side of the man who, now that he stood only four or five paces from us, I saw was levelling a weapon at my solar plexus – not a lightstick, but an old-fashioned action-reaction affair, brought to the edges of old space courtesy of the marketing genius of Smith & Wesson. Even if he had been unarmed, I would, of course, have still found myself acting the part of the cornered wimp. With my clone rapidly deteriorating, I was in a position to bitch-slap neither android, man, nor pig. I pointed towards the museum piece whose eye transfixed my vitals. "What does it matter if –"

He pointed the gun at Dilyria. "*She* isn't using telepresence," I froze. "That bod is her one and only." He cleared his throat. "We're all going to take a nice little trip back to your ship. And there you can show me where to get my hands on your original. Or else..." He smiled, revealing fashionably carious teeth. "I blow her back into the fifth-fucking-dimension."

My gaze flitted from Dilyria to the cop, and then to the two men who flanked him.

"You can call me Kaluza," said one. "And him –"

"Me?" said the other. "Klein. You can call me Klein."

The cop looked at me and smiled. "You owe certain people a great deal of money. These two good men and true are here to see you repay it."

"We're here to repo your ship," said Kaluza.

"But only after I," said the cop, "repossess you, Mr De Cruz. For credit fraud. And indeed, much else." He tugged at his earlobe with his free hand. "You know, what with all this prevarication, I don't think I *will* recommend you get away with murder."

"And me?" said Dilyria.

The Shylocks laughed.

"So this is the hyperbeing," said Klein. "The lil'l ultra-terrestrial who wanted to be extraterrestrial."

"No counterintuitive stunts, eh, Dilyria?" said the cop.

"Fat chance while I'm in this body, flatfoot."

"We can but hope that that is correct," said a thin, twittering voice from out of the dark. "In any case, the time we have spent on constructing a new home for you would seem to have been wasted." The shadows parted to herald the arrival of something whose sovereignty extended over other, wholly alien, shores. A sphere, that resembled something like a big, prismatic soap bubble, swam into view, gliding towards us several feet above the ground. Like an Excelsis starship, it provided a planar intersection with our own universe, allowing the hyperbeing who sat within to see and be heard.

I saw, at first, only blobs in space: cross-sections of flesh, bone and muscle. The thing within the sphere was



a bottled monstrosity, something to be displayed in a pathology lab. The lumps of meat dissolved and reformed. They were like vectors, tensors and quaternions of some inscrutable mathematical form swimming across a blank LCD. A brain that had evolved to detect predators on the African savannah, prepossessed as it was by depth, breadth and width, was a natural liability when it came to dealing with the fifth-dimensional entities we called the Excelsis.

But then, high in geo-stationary orbit, where my original lay in suspension, the implant that intensified my spatial awareness kicked in. It immediately proved a sounder investment than my clone. The kaleidoscope of non-Euclidean geometry coalesced into a vaguely anthropomorphic shape – something resembling a Picasso or a Braque, perhaps, the planes of jaw, cheeks, nose, mouth and eyes viewed simultaneously from several different angles.

"The day you met that human, you were doomed, little one," said the Excelsis.

"Aw, long before that, Nuncle," said Dilyria, playing the fool. "I was a lost cause when I woke up one day and discovered I had no free will. Not compared to humankind, that is." She took a step closer to me. "I've told you before, haven't I, Abraxas? The Excelsis, as individuals, play no part in creating their world; their culture is pre-eminent." Dilyria shot her fellow hyperbeing a disdainful look. "When Nuncle says 'I', it doesn't refer to a conscious inner being; it's just a convention by which Excelsis culture articulates itself. And that's why I exchanged my old body for this one. Like poor old Nuncle, I had a false selfhood. I was a zombie animated solely by memes. But unlike him, I came to *know* that I was false. I came to hunger for reality."

"When you are back in your own universe, you will see things in a more sober light," said the Excelsis, or rather – as Dilyria would have it – the impersonal culture that used him as its mouthpiece. "We will deprogramme you."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "You sentenced her to incarceration, here, on Malpertuis, in the penitentiaries of the archipelago."

"I see now that that was a mistake. Her crimes are serious, and if she stays in this dimension, there is always the chance that she will rescind, as she has tonight."

I spat. "Yeah, like it's all so damn *serious*. Jesus, all she ever did was modify a Podkletnov drive." I drew the heel of my foot over the clot of spittle on the ground and discovered that it possessed the ominous consistency of chewing gum infused with quartz. "You've overreacted from the first," I concluded, wondering how much longer my doppelgänger would hold up.

"The drive your crew bought at Tau was a simple, electrogravitic device, which should have allowed you only basic, relativistic speeds. But thanks to your inamorata the drive now feeds off the zero-point energy field in a similar fashion to Excelsis ships. And that makes its annihilative power enormous. Every cubic centimetre of empty space contains more energy than the total energy of all the matter in the known universe. In the wrong hands such a drive could destroy whole worlds."

"Systems, even," said the human cop.

"Only ever tinkered with that drive," said Dilyria, "if I'd actually been *successful* in modifying Zarzuela, then I would have given humans the ability to invade your universe, just as you have theirs."

"Our universe, child."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Not any more," she said. "Not for me, at any rate."

The Excelsis shook his head, angles, planes, and curves swirling in and out of focus as my chip worked overtime to integrate those glimpses of terrible perspective into something manageable.

"When we first came to *this* universe, human physicists were still looking for the underlying principles of String theory. Ten-dimensionality was untestable. We helped them invent a new mathematics. We gave them empirical data. But in return, we expected restraint."

"You wanted us to heel, in other words," I said. Even though they had had no taste for conquest, the psychological effects of first contact in the early years of the 21st century had been as devastating as the *conquista* of Cortés and Pizarro. Within a few decades, humanity began to drift away into space, to form the Reticulation: a diaspora of proprietorial information nodes based on what technology – always too paltry, always second-best – the Excelsis had seen fit to confer.

"You cannot be allowed access to the zero-point field," said the Excelsis. "You have not yet learned to coexist in peace. That is, after all, why we came here. To save you from yourselves."

"Oh, you're not scared of *us* getting burnt," I said.

"They're just scared we might burn *them*," concluded Dilyria. For it was, indeed, humanity that had initiated first contact. With little more than a Van de Graaff generator and new developments in superconducting coatings, deep black projects at the Skunk Works had yielded torsion fields that promised the holy grail of anti-gravity. And, of course, far more. String theory had long predicted six or seven extra dimensions, but had thought them to be compressed into an area only  $10^{-35}$  metres across. Some physicists, however, had suggested that the extra spatial dimensions could be like our own space and time. The black projects offered proof: the fields – which, in those days, were unmarshalled, and far more dangerous than those produced by Zarzuela's current drive – provided a gateway, a fifth-dimensional vortex that intersected the parallel universe that was home to the Excelsis.

"Don't want to sound disrespectful," said Kaluza.

"That's right," said Klein. "This is all very *interesting*, but we have a ship to repossess."

"You can't take her back to the fifth-dimension," I said. "Not as she is. Her mind –"

"The topographies may indeed drive her a little mad," said the Excelsis, "until we unmask her and return her to her proper form. But I daresay she will adjust. As I hope you will, when you are taken back to Earth."

I stared at my feet, slowly shaking my head. "But that's ridiculous. My Earth no longer exists. Since I left, that's 1000 years have passed. Earth is abandoned. Finished." Dilyria was my only way of travelling backwards in time.



She was my childhood, the childhood I had never had.

The cop moved forward and took me by the arm. "Earth may be finished, but the old girl still provides a suitable home for undesirables." He laughed. "The Excelsis will take care of Dilyria. You'll be taking *my* ship, Mr De Cruz."

"And we'll be coming with you," said Kaluza. "We need to dock with the asteroid and check her out. We can get the necessary paperwork done later."

"Yeah," said Klein. "After we make a tally of what's salvageable. We're entitled to our cut, after all."

"You'll get paid," said the cop wearily. "The repo, the reward – you'll get it all." He laughed again, more softly. "You lousy bastards."

And then, just as the cop was pulling a pair of cuffs from his back pocket, a great shout resounded through my mind, so loud that I thought the downlink from the ship had malfunctioned, threatening to blow my brains out. I flinched; the shout came again, and I knew, by the stares of my captors and my own instincts, that it came, not from inside my head, but from over the churning, violent waters of the bay.

"DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HIM!" boomed Zarzuela.

The brass-coloured octagon hovered above the waves a hundred feet from where we stood. It was one of the ship's few remaining probes, converted so that it might serve either as an escape pod or a recovery vehicle – the latter function, of course, being the *raison d'être* for its deployment tonight.

Lightning crackled above us, directly followed by an explosion of thunder. It began to rain.

The next shout was so loud and distorted that, with the exception of the Excelsis, we all clamped our hands over our ears.

"LISTEN: THIS IS THE DEAL." The converted probe came a little nearer. Tentatively, I uncovered my ears and leaned over the rail. "YOU ALLOW ABRAXAS DE CRUZ TO ENTER THE SHUTTLE."

"And why should we do that?" said the cop.

"BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T," said Zarzuela, a slight quavering to her voice hinting at a little girl playing with the Wizard of Oz's megaphone, "I'LL BREAK ORBIT AND CRASH MYSELF INTO MALPERTUIS." For a few seconds, everybody was silent, the rain that spattered the boardwalk a melancholy accompaniment to a growing sense of awe. "WE'RE TALKING EXTINCTION-LEVEL IMPACT," she added.

"She's a big girl," the cop conceded.

"She's a doomsday bitch two miles long," muttered Kaluza.

"Is that *extinction-level*?" said Klein.

"Who wants to find out?" shot back his partner.

The cop waved a hand through the air. "All right, all right, everybody calm down and don't panic. Zarzuela has fail-safes." He turned to me with a stupid look of triumph on his face. "She *can't* take human life." Then the cop stared deep into my eyes, his frown deepening as he doubtless recollected my charge sheet. "Oh Jesus."

"What is it?" said Kaluza.

"I advise," said the cop, with a ruminative, Nixonesque

sway of his jowls, "extreme caution. There've been rumours that he and the ship have, in the past, enjoyed something of a symbiotic relationship. Some say they even conspired to exterminate its original crew."

"Impossible," said Klein.

"Not if the asteroid's found a way to *override* her fail-safes," said the cop.

"But we cannot allow them to go free," said the Excelsis. "With the girl ready to work on, and improve, the ship's drive – to perhaps even take them superluminal – none of us will be safe, not in this universe, or any other."

"I TOLD YOU BEFORE," said Zarzuela. "I'M TALKING ABOUT A DEAL. YOU KEEP THE GIRL, I TAKE COMMANDER DE CRUZ. AND YOU GET TO LIVE ANOTHER DAY." "Zee!" I called out, "cut the crap. This isn't really *me* down here. My consciousness is back on the ship. Just make sure you get Dilyria off-world. Forget about my double."

Zarzuela's voice dropped in volume as she struggled to assume a tone of intimacy. "I've been monitoring you, De Cruz. The *tabula rasa* of your cloned brain has become damaged. Further feedback will cause damage to the original, too. You have to return. Now."

"Disconnect me," I said.

"I can only do that by opening up your clone's skull. Your fax has *very* proprietorial electrical activity. If I don't close it down just so, the feedback loop will ensure that your consciousness is broadcast all the way to the galactic centre. I need to get you into ship's surgery. Much longer down here and your *real* brain is going to putrefy."

"Zee," I cried, "I *can't* leave her."

"You're no use to her dead," she returned, with a glib reasonableness that could not hide her satisfaction.

I stared at Dilyria. She avoided my eyes. "It was really so brave of you to come for me while tele-immersed, Abraxas." And then she looked out to sea, where the recovery vehicle waited, hovering above the growing swell of the waves.

"I've spent a long time tracking this one down," said the cop. "I – I can't just roll over and let him go."

"It is the girl I want," said the Excelsis. "Not the boy. Release him."

"What about us?" said Klein. "What about our money?"

"Be quiet," said Kaluza, "we have to think."

"DO WE HAVE A DEAL?" bawled Zarzuela.

The cop chose to make his move, grabbing me by a lapel, while his other hand levelled his primitive weapon at the Excelsis. "No; the ship is bluffing," he said, throwing caution to the wind, now so strong that it threatened to settle this and all other issues by sweeping the six of us into the surf. "She's got to be. No way would she go kamikaze. And no way am I –"

Electric-blue discharge jagged from the alien's biosphere. It snaked around the cop's body, then vanished, leaving only a trail of ionized air. The policeman stood frozen, his mouth agape, his handgun held impotently before him.

"Go, Abraxas," said Dilyria. "Go, while you have the chance. It's not as if we haven't been through this before. Go – before Nuncle here changes his mind."

"But where they're taking you – I can't follow! It's

impossible!"

"We had fun, Abraxas. Two weeks of fun. But don't pretend you know me. I'm no angel from the wrong side of the celestial tracks. I'm no immortal divette who's descended from on high to sing you songs that'll resurrect your past. No, no, I'm *none* of those things. Not even the Excelsis can turn the clock back, Abraxas. So it's maybe best we call it a day. Go home, cabin boy. Go home to mother. I can't give you what you're looking for."

The shuttle began to move over the sea. As it came to rest a few feet above the jetty, a door slid back in its brass-coloured shell.

"This ain't fair," said Klein, stabbing a finger in my direction, and wishing, I think, that he could use it to nail me to the boardwalk. "I track this one across a dozen or so light years, and what do I get for my pains? If it weren't for Kaluza and me —"

"Take it easy," said Kaluza, "we're dealing with the fucking Excelsis here."

Dilyria pressed her fingers to her lips, levelled them, and blew the imprinted kiss towards me. "Better luck next time, Abraxas."

Who was she? Who had she ever been? How could she bid me leave so easily, and speak such lies about herself? She had been made of the stuff we used to call dark matter, before we discovered that dark matter was only ordinary matter that had been hidden from us in the reaches of hyperspace. Her five-dimensional flesh had possessed the same kind of protons and electrons as my own. But what was the nature of her subjectivity?

I had no time for further reflection. I knew what I had to do. However unlikely the prospects of freeing Dilyria a second time, I needed Zarzuela's help.

I stepped into the shuttle, bending my back to clear the low doorframe. I sat down, cross-legged, on the floor. Like the circumambient walls, it was padded, bringing to mind a madhouse cell: a premonition of the one that had been waiting for me, perhaps, ever since I had met Dilyria.

"THERE'S NO FOLLOWING THE EXCELSIS IF THEY RETREAT INTO FIFTH-DIMENSIONAL SPACE," said Zarzuela, unable to resist the temptation, I think, to gloat a little. And then, so low that only I would be able to hear: "We'll head for the frontier, to the edge of the galactic habitable zone."

"Later, Zee," I said, exasperated. "Save it for later."

"Nobody can look after you like I can, De Cruz."

The door began to close. But before it snapped shut, I heard a shout from the jetty. "Klein! What are you doing?"

The Shylock had somehow managed to eel his way into the shuttle just as we had begun to take off.

"I'm not going to be cheated," he said, with a snarl. "I'm coming with you. And I mean to take your ship."

He held the cop's gun.

The shuttle docked. I peered through the small porthole and watched Malpertuis turn beneath us, other shuttles, as well as satellites, platforms and big, commercial spaceplanes, glinting like motes of dust in the oblique rays of light cast by the primary as it rose above the Earthlet.

The door opened. With the Shylock's gun pressed against the small of my back, I hobbled into the airlock.

"Now," I said, as casually as I was able.

"Now *what*?" said Klein. But Zarzuela understood. Explosive bolts detonated, and, with a concussion that nearly threw me off my feet, the shuttle was jettisoned into space.

I took hold of the handle of the inner door as air, replete with Zarzuela's distinctive, musty scent — it would have been enough to tell me that I was again in the embrace of the other woman in my life, even if I had been blind — whistled past my ears. I looked over my shoulder. The Shylock was hurtling into the black well of nothingness behind me, his body distended preparatory to explosive decompression. I tried to cry out, but the air was taken from my lungs; I may even have experienced a momentary synecdoche; but if I did, the robot arm that had been originally designed to load the modest amounts of personal freight allotted by company contract, saved me. One claw took me by the collar of my trenchcoat, while its opposite fastened itself around my waist.

The airlock's inner door slid back. Just as I began to feel the nauseating effects of vacuum — just as my eyes seemed ready to pop — there was another, more welcome, rush of air. The robot arm jerked, tossing me into the main body of the ship; the door closed. And, quite spectacularly, I threw up.

For an indeterminate time, I lay still, my lungs rasping as I drew in more and more of Zarzuela's warm, dry microclimate.

"An Excelsis vessel is about to emerge from the dark side," I heard at last. Her voice was almost unrecognizable, every other syllable obscured by static. Unable, while I was in the clone, to communicate in her customary manner, she had reverted to using the ship's PA, with mixed results.

"Is Dilyria aboard?"

"We can expect that to be the case." The static increased, signalling, perhaps, irascibility. "Come on, De Cruz. We have to get out of here. And trust me. The annulus of the galactic habitable zone is fuzzy. No one's sure how broad it is. The frontier is probably not as dangerous as they say. And out there, there're maybe 40 billion systems favourable to life. We could build a home. A real home."

I shook my head, brushing aside the streams of archaic read-out that had been sucked out of a nearby filing cabinet and had fallen across my chest and face. I lay in one of Zarzuela's bays, and my voice, now that it had regained a little of its strength, echoed off distant, invisible walls. "I have to get to the bubble." I struggled to my feet and began to stumble, then trot, towards a nearby exit.

"And I have to get you to surgery," said Zarzuela, raising her voice so that its distorted rumble similarly echoed throughout the bay's huge confines.

"No time," I said. I skidded to a halt and placed a hand to the side of my head. Something wet and slimy had seemingly adhered itself to my cheek. I pulled it away, inspected it, and gave a startled cry as I realized I was staring at my left ear.

"No time?" said Zarzuela. "No kidding. Unless I cut into that thing in your head that thinks it's a brain within the next 30 minutes, your *real* brain is going to experience some extremely grim neuro-electrical fireworks."

I disencumbered myself of the trenchcoat and broke into a sprint. "I said I'm going to the bubble. Have the elevator ready. And put the weapons' systems on line." I shouldered open a fire exit and found myself in the ship's central trench. "I ran away once before, all those months ago in Ophiuchi. I won't run again. We have to fight, Zee. We have to fight."

I gazed up at the occluded stars, the vast expanse of black nothingness that, in light of my knowledge of String theory, I knew was no more than a by-product of vibrations in higher-dimensional universes: the transitory, bittersweet music of hyperspace.

The Excelsis emerged from darkness. I was determined not to dwell upon impossibility or give undue respect to the cosmic censor. The sight, however, of an interdimensional starship had always confounded, not just my senses, but my chauvinistic belief that there might be no limit to human understanding.

My chip kicked in. The alien vessel was a sphere similar to those used by the Excelsis when they made planet-fall, except it was opaque and at least five miles in diameter, and more importantly, not a sphere at all, but a hypersphere. For long seconds, I was bewitched by the spectacle of its weirdly ecstatic co-ordinates. And then Zarzuela snapped me out of my trance and back to the concerns of my own spatiotemporal order.

"I think they have an escort, De Cruz. I detect ships coming off the planet's surface. I believe they intend to rendezvous."

"Why does something like that need an escort?"

"The Excelsis don't like to get their hands dirty. They leave the satisfactions of base justice to little people." Several greenish-blue dots appeared against the backdrop of the Earthlet's eclipsed continents. "Here they come. They're trying to light us up."

"Hmm. The locals are sort of Pre-Cambrian in terms of security. I'd reckon our uninvited guests are friends of that cop."

"Whoever they are, they're leaving the ionosphere."

"Interceptors?"

"Foo-fighters," said Zarzuela.

"Shite."

"Mach 5. No, no, Mach 6, Mach 7. And closing. Fast."

"Shite in a bucket."

"Skirting the atmosphere now. Achieving escape velocity. Plasma cloaked. But within visual."

The dots of light revealed themselves as the kind of saucer-shaped craft that owed their speed and manoeuvrability to the very latest in Excelsis technology transfer.

"Can you –"

"The bogies have armed. They're –"

Trillions of watts of laser energy streaked across space and panned Zarzuela's hull. Rock vaporized; several of the abandoned habitats exploded; a shower of atomized debris formed long, glowing clouds that partly obscured

my view of the planet and the Excelsis ship.

"De Cruz, we have to back off." Her voice was unnaturally subdued, as if she feared articulating the inevitable. "They have thermo-nukes and they're getting ready to use them."

"How are our photonics?"

"Charged up. But you know what bargain-basement stuff we have. Is this really the time to –"

"Like, there'd be a better?"

"Firing," she said, with a sigh that, even in present circumstances, could still annoy me with its hint of infinite condescension.

The floor trembled. The shock-wave grew more violent. I was forced to grip the armrests to prevent myself being unseated. The vibrations peaked then dissipated in a series of slow, modulated waves. I gazed apprehensively towards the stern. The ablative shield had protected me from the worst of the blast, as Zarzuela's lasers and, probably, many other components, had given up the ghost.

"If we want to outrun them," said Zarzuela, "we have to leave now."

I focused on the Excelsis ship. From one of its poles exotic matter harvested from the seething, probabilistic foam of the plenum was being spewed into space. The force needed to keep open a wormhole was tremendous – something like ten to the power of 33 pounds per square inch; only exotic matter possessing negative mass, and therefore repulsive gravity, could achieve such a feat. The lensing effect produced by the negative mass made the wormhole visible. Unlike normal matter, whose gravity makes light bend towards it, matter with negative mass had the opposite effect, deflecting light from the stars behind to form a caustic.

The wormhole's throat glowed. For a moment my augmented powers of visualization allowed me to see into the universe of the Excelsis, the higher-spatial realm of impossible geometries that, if I stared upon it too long, would override my neural implant like a monstrously complex, pictographic representation of a *koan*, and surely curdle my brain.

The alien ship began to enter hyperspace.

"Fire on it," I said, stamping my foot upon the floor and wincing as the naked sole impacted with steel lattice-work. In frustration I compounded my error by bringing my fist down against the armrest. It shattered, as if it had been frozen in liquid nitrogen, fragments of bone and blood ricocheting off the smoked walls of the observation bubble.

Zarzuela giggled. An incipient hysteria lent her laughter an unsettling edge. "Fire on it? I have nothing left, and even if I did –"

"I said –"

"It's an Excelsis ship, De Cruz. Its countermeasures alone could destroy us."

"We have to stop it going into hyperspace, Zee." Half of it had already disappeared through the wormhole.

"Well, there's the rail gun, of course."

"Rail gun?" I said, amazed. "It's still intact? Then let's go!"

"On line. And peak signal voltage coming up," she replied, her emotional mufflers coming into effect, allow-

ing her to assume her role of a dour, efficient, girl Friday.

"Then fire." The mega-joule, compulsator-powered rail gun had a 16 mile/s muzzle velocity, its sabot cradle carrying a tungsten round down the rails and off into and through its target.

I counted off the seconds as the round crossed the distance that separated us from the big, interdimensional ship – a ship disappearing, like a moon going from full to half to quarter, until only a slim crescent remained.

"Contact," said Zarzuela. Then, after a short pause: "And deflected into the planet's atmosphere." The wormhole began to close. "Excelsis countermeasures have been deployed," she added, with aggravating punctiliousness. Suddenly, the bubble was surrounded in the same green-blue glow that emanated from the foo-fighters.

Then, as casually as a pebble picked up off the beach, we were skimmed across the deep. The effect of the anti-gravity beam was such that Zarzuela's own gravity field was, for the moment, cancelled out. I gasped, massive g-forces pressing me back into my chair with such violence that I lost consciousness.

Supine, I looked up at the domed ceiling, like a drunk gazing through a miserable, fly-specked skylight into the louring darkness of another bad day.

"It's the drive," said Zarzuela. "Just before it cracked up, it put time out of joint." I turned my head. Zarzuela addressed me from one of the spider-like droids that scurried through the ship carrying out minor repairs. "I have to decapitate you, De Cruz." Something that looked like a buzz-saw extruded itself from the metal arachnid's shiny carapace.

"Come again?"

"Your body has almost completely disintegrated. It's the only way I can get your cloned brain to the lab and carry out the necessary invasive surgery." I tried to sit up. "No, don't do that –" For the second time since boarding, I vomited. My torso was little more than a piece of mucilaginous wreckage. I collapsed and stared up into the black, unfamiliar vistas of space.

"What's going on?"

"The ship contains all kinds of anomalies, both inside and out. We're in a state of chromomutational flux."

"The anti-gravity beam must have flung us into deep space."

"Deep space? More like deep shit."

"But what's happened to the stars?"

"We're seeing them as they'll be in about 100 billion years. The galaxies have exponentially red-shifted until they've vanished over the universe's horizon. They're so far away that we'll never see their light. What you see is just the Milky Way – or rather the Milky Way merged with the Andromeda galaxy. Nothing much out there: just spheres of degenerate carbon glowing faintly in the infrared. Stellar remnants and cold, dead planets. Do you want to hear more?"

I shouldn't have been surprised. Time, for me, had always been problematic, with the past and present giving way to a madly accelerating future. The saw began to buzz. I squinted, watching its hovering blade move

nearer and nearer to my throat.

"It's the things inside the ship that give me most concern," she said.

"Like what?" I clenched my teeth as I felt the saw come within a hair's-breadth of my Adam's apple.

But even if, at that moment, the saw had not swiftly descended and shorn my head from my trunk, I would have known her answer; for standing in the shadows, a little behind the somewhat oversedulous droid, I saw the figures of my Mum and Dad, and behind them, my sisters, just as they had been when I was a child.

I had not recaptured time. This was not Real Time at all. Real Time was gone, lost to another dimension. Life, I knew, would henceforth be only another, crueller virtuality.

The dome, with its wretched absence of stars, had gone, to be replaced by the cavern-like ceiling of my cabin.

I was lying in my old bunk.

I eased myself up onto one elbow. My body was restored. Or rather, I had made the transition back to my original body, the ruined clone I hoped long sluiced into space.

From the bedside table I idly picked up one of the Möbius strips I had constructed out of print-out. After toying nervously with it between my fingers, I crushed it within my fist, then threw it upon the floor, where it joined other crumpled examples of my previous efforts to find the form that might give some understanding of the realm I had longed to enter.

"Are the ghosts still here?"

"They've gone," said Zarzuela, from inside my head.

"All the space-time distortions have gone. Outside, the stars are back where they should be. But I've had to close down the drive. We're drifting, De Cruz. We're lost."

"Yes, lost," I said. I sounded, I knew, less like a man about to enter his 16th year, and determined to have a life of his own, than a bleating child whose body and mind had been so confused by random bouts of hypertime that he would have had no idea how long he had been in space if someone like Zarzuela had not been there to remind him.

But it was true. All hope was gone. Dilyria was hidden, now, at a right angle to reality: the only reality I would perhaps ever know: this cold, lonely universe, this nether dimension, this fallen place, as lost to the past as it was to the future.

"If I could help you," said Zarzuela, softly. "If I could..." She fell silent.

"You've always helped me," I said. But I knew that, though she could offer me books, movies, sims, music and endless advice, she couldn't give me what I most wanted. I wanted life, not its representation. I wanted the human world. A woman. Children. The family I remembered having in the Philippines. "Zee, you're my friend. You've always been my friend."

She appeared to me in the same manner as she had when I had been a boy: as a flickering, imperfect holo.

"Your lasers," I whispered. "I didn't think –"

"We all want to be real," she said. "Don't you understand that?"

Was Mind something that swam into being when

chemistry and architecture became appropriately complicated or was it a fundamental quality of the universe, something that a machine could tap into, as much as a human – in other words, an article of grace?

"When somebody offers you what you most desire and need," she continued, "companionship, a sense of belonging, home – you become vulnerable. I understand, De Cruz, because I feel what you're feeling. I always have."

The holo approached my bedside. The lasers faltered, and she drifted in and out of focus, even vanishing for a few seconds, before reappearing with her contours more fully defined than before. She wore a frock such as my mother had stitched together for my youngest sister's first communion. It was cinched with a big, pink sash of watered silk.

For as long as I could remember, the only thing that had sustained me was the thought that there might be another universe where all came right. The miracle, I suppose, was that it was possible to conceive of such a realm at all, a place just beyond our peripheral vision, always with us, and only as distant as it was near. The stars about me were bright and senseless. But the miracle remained. Heaven, like beauty, was necessary. And it waited.

She was waiting, too, just beyond the limits of my vision. And yet too far for me to reach out and grasp. I almost felt her at my shoulder, breathing on my neck from the stacked orders of being that culminated in God. And hardly daring to turn, I closed my eyes, knowing she was with me in the darkness.

But exactly who she was? No, no; I was no longer quite sure.

Dilyria had hungered for reality; and she had thought she would find it in my world, just as I had thought I'd find my own reality in hers.

"But nothing," I said, "is real." Except, I thought, this unrequited ache in my soul. And you, Zarzuela. And you.

"I'm here, De Cruz." I reached out to touch her. My hand closed upon nothingness. "I'll always be here," she said. An insubstantial tear ran down her pale, translucent cheek. "I was here all the time."

Richard Calder's most recent novel is *Impakto* (Earthlight, 2001), which is based on a horror story we published in *Interzone* some time ago. Forthcoming is the futuristic sword-and-sorcery epic *Lord Soho*. His latest story, above, represents a new departure for him – into space fiction.

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# The Ghost in the Valley

*Alexander Glass*

A shadow slipped out of the trees, into a clearing where the moonlight fell and froze upon thick midwinter snow. There it paused, casting a rather rotund shadow of its own. Twisting its body about, it looked back, anxiously, along the soft trail it had left behind, and on into the woods. Then it looked ahead, to the curve of the bridge over the stream, and on into the town of Putney. The water in the stream was set like stone; the stones of the bridge were glazed with ice. In the crisp blue light, the bridge and the water seemed part of each other, fused into one by the cold. On the blanket of snow, the shadow turned, and moved towards the bridge.

The man wore a heavy black overcoat, and a tall black hat upon his head. One chubby hand reached inside the coat, fishing for a pocket-watch; then it abandoned the attempt, apparently deciding that the hour had grown so late that there was now no point in measuring it. His bushy white brows were perpetually raised, as if in an attempt to hold open his eyes. His round cheeks were reddened by the cold; frost was settling in his moustache,

like a sprinkling of cold sugar. As he panted across the bridge, his eyes snatched details from out of the gloom: the copper-green moss between the stones; the shape of a white owl in the arms of an oak; the flicker of firelight in a window up ahead.

A small grey inn sat huddled at the edge of the town, roofed now with a heavy mantle of snow. A curlicue of smoke wound lazily from the chimney, and in the frame of a downstairs window a warm red light was dancing. Inside, dark against the flames, something moved, and then moved again. For an instant, a wrinkled face appeared at the window, pressed to the frosted glass. Then it was gone. Moments later it appeared once more, this time in the doorway. Beneath it, a bony hand held a stub of candle, the young flame trembling as cold air coiled about it.

"Who's there?" he called out, squinting through the flame. The words froze as they met the air.

The shadowed figure took a step back, and turned aside, as if to flee into the forest. Then he looked up, so that the

wavering light fell upon his round and ruddy face.

"Cauldhame?" he ventured. His voice trembled, perhaps from the cold.

"Huntingdon!" the old man exclaimed. His voice seemed very harsh in the silence. The lines in his face deepened as he smiled: a smile of welcome, or perhaps only a smile of relief. "It had grown so late that I thought you must have turned back, or stopped off somewhere on the road."

"Ah." Huntingdon paused inside the door, momentarily blinded as his eyeglasses misted in the heat of the fire. "To tell you the truth, I was lost. I took the last train from Moreau Rose, and it left me on the edge of the wilderness. I came through the trees from the station, and wasn't entirely sure of the way. I might have been tramping down towards London, or out into the marshes, or..." He faltered, and finished, rather lamely: "Or somewhere else altogether."

"Well, you're here now: that's what matters. There's a fire going, and some quite respectable food if you want it; and an even more respectable brandy, if you'd prefer. You look as if you need it, after your little adventure. You look as if —"

"It wasn't an adventure," Huntingdon interrupted; but then, for a long time, he refused to say any more.

Inside the inn, the coat found its place on the coat-rack, and the hat upon the hat-stand, and before long Huntingdon himself was planted in his proper place: a comfortable armchair, not too close to the fire, with a footstool before him and a glass in his hand. His eyeglasses were clear once more — he had polished them vigorously with a cloth — and his feet were beginning to thaw. Still he remained silent, brooding, which was not in his nature, until his companion began to show signs of impatience, shifting in his seat, tapping the bowl of his pipe absently against the heel of his palm, even clearing his throat once or twice, all without any discernible effect on the other.

"Now look," Cauldhame said at last, as Huntingdon swirled the brandy in his glass for the hundredth time and stared glumly into the hearth, "this isn't like you at all. I want to know what you saw. It can't have been a wolf, not so close to London. It wasn't a beggar or a brigand, or you would have spoken of it at once, and huffed and blustered about it, or had me call out the constables, instead of sitting there like a stone. We know each other pretty well, I think; I know you're not one to be easily frightened. So: what did you see?"

"I can't be sure," the other replied, and suddenly he turned, snaring Cauldhame's gaze with his own. His hooded eyes, trapped behind the little round spectacles, and his elevated brows, generally lent him an air of bemusement which was almost comical. Now, however, there was nothing amusing in his look. He took a breath, as if to speak, but only held it a moment, his lips pressed tightly together. In that moment, Cauldhame knew that his friend had seen something out of the ordinary.

There was a snap, and a rush of sparks, as a log shifted in the fire.

"It began on the train," Huntingdon said, his gaze fol-

lowing a grey plume of smoke as it danced sinuously up into the chimney. "I was anxious to make sure that I stopped at the right place; I don't travel much these days, as you know — not since Elizabeth died — and the trains aren't what they were. If I'd missed the station, and been carried on into London, I would have been stranded there; I doubt there would have been another train back tonight. I had a carriage to myself, and I sat beside the window, counting the quarter-mile posts to pass the time.

"All at once I was struck by a wholly irrational fear: I imagined I had boarded the wrong train altogether, and was hurtling through the country, further and further from my destination. I had travelled this line before, but the view from my window seemed unfamiliar. In the darkness between the quarter-mile posts, I expected to see the lights of London in the distance, like a heap of sullen coals in the arm of the valley. Perhaps, I thought, I would see the gloomy towers of smog that stood above the black bodies of the factories, or a silver glint of moonlight on the surface of the Thames. I saw none of these things. Instead, the land rushing past seemed uninhabited. All was dark: I could not see a light from a single window. The only light was the gleaming of the moon upon the snow. Worse, I could see no roads, no farmland, not a single patch of tended ground. The trees grew wild and crooked, their limbs twisted, their dry fingers raking the wind.

"A white shape rushed past, close to the track: not an owl, as I thought at first, but the painted marker of a quarter-mile post. I was oddly relieved to see it; it was a sign that all was well, a sign that even in this wilderness, wherever it was, the hand of man had touched the earth, and imposed a semblance of order.

"I set to thinking where I might be. It was obvious that the train had not even come within sight of London. I might have been tired enough to board the wrong train, I reasoned, but surely I was not so tired that I would have missed the glow of the city outside my window. I concluded that my train must be travelling on another line altogether, and since I did not recognize the place we were passing, I had no way of knowing where I might be. The sensible thing to do would be to seek out the guard, or at least another passenger, who might be able to assist me.

"Leaving the carriage, I wandered along the train a while, but saw no one, not a single soul. I was not much surprised: this must have been the last train of the night, on what was most likely an obscure branch line, and I might well have been the last passenger left aboard.

"I came to the last carriage, and still I had seen no one. I was about to turn back, and make my way up toward the engine, when something odd, and yet oddly familiar, caught my eye. I moved to the nearest window, and peered out, certain that I had seen something, that I had recognized something, but unable to say what it might have been. Then I realized, with a shock, that the quarter-mile posts were gone. Wherever I was, it was a place not ruled by man.

"The train began to slow, and I thought for a moment that it was about to grind to a halt, in the midst of the wilderness, with no station — no sign of human life! — in

sight; but it had only reduced its speed for safety as it rounded a bend in the track.

"I forced open the window, and leaned out, breathing in the rich, dark taste of the forest on the air. Between the nearest trees, I saw the land fall away, opening out into a great, shallow valley. Amidst a pool of mist and shadow, an army of trees stretched away down to the valley floor; and there, in the distance, I thought my eyes had caught a glimpse of silver, an icy sparkle, as of bright winter moonlight upon the surface of a river. In that moment, I knew that I was no longer in England – or rather, that the view from my window was not the England of our century. This was not some acreage of fields left to run wild, nor some stretch of pleasant woodland left to grow as it would. This was a forest greater, and older, and wilder, than any yet surviving. This was London, but a London before the land was tamed. I was certain of it, and with that certainty came a kind of awe of what had come before man, and a kind of joy that it would never come again, a pride that human hands had shaped the land, and turned it irrevocably to our purpose."

Huntingdon frowned, and fell silent. He raised his glass to his lips, and was surprised to find it empty. Waving aside Cauldhame's offer of another, he set the glass down, and took a deep, slow breath.

"And then?" prompted his friend.

"There was something moving," Huntingdon went on, his voice shrunk now to a whisper. "Something was moving in the trees. At first I took it for an animal: it was wrapped in skins, and moved as an animal moves. It was kneeling on the ground, its hands touching the earth. Another shape sat beside it, a great grey dog, its muzzle raised to sniff the air, the moon glinting in its eyes. It slunk out of the trees, the other shape at its heels, and I leaned forward, hoping to catch a glimpse of its face; but the train had already carried me past the spot, and now the engine was gathering speed.

"I stumbled to the nearest seat, and closed my eyes a moment. Only for a moment; but when I opened them again, I sensed that something had changed. Outside my window, a white shape rushed past, close to the track: a quarter-mile post. I had been relieved when I had seen it before; and now I almost cried out, so glad was I that it was there.

"There's little more to tell. The train came to a halt, and deposited me on the empty platform. It left me there, alone; and even though I was alone, I was glad to be close to civilization once more. I hurried from the station, and turned my steps toward the town; at least, I hoped that was where my steps were taking me, for I was unsure of the way, in the moonlight, and in the snow. I was late, and I wondered whether you would have waited, or done the sensible thing and retired. I followed my nose, unsure for a while whether I was nearing the town or wandering out into the wild; but soon I saw a familiar shape by the side of the road, a Putney milestone. I climbed a shallow hill, and crossed a grove of dark pines, their needles dusted with snow – a small grove, well-tended, the very antithesis of the endless wilderness I had glimpsed from the win-

dow. Yet the forest was close, and I couldn't help but to look over my shoulder, once or twice; I was nervous, as you might imagine. Even now I've not finished trembling.

"I hurried out of the trees, into a clearing just outside the town, on the other side of the bridge. The snow rested in a thick, heavy blanket, and I struggled across, leaving a cold, wet trail in my wake. Everything was still: it was as if the entire world was frozen in the cold of the moon.

"I am not sure what made me turn, then, and look back into the trees. There was no sound to break the stillness; but there may have been a sudden movement, a white shape flickering at the corner of my eye. I thought of the quarter-mile posts, of how they had suddenly vanished, and left me alone in the wild. I looked back anxiously, along the ragged trail of my footsteps, and on into the woods.

"A figure stood beneath the trees: a figure wrapped in skins, with a huge grey dog at its side. I saw its face clearly now: it was a young woman, her pale skin smudged with earth, her hair tied back beneath a rough brown hood. Her gaze met my own, and she frowned; and then, though her expression had not changed, she seemed suddenly on the point of tears.

"Then they were gone, and I was alone once more, or almost alone: a white owl was perched nearby, on a limb of some tree or other, watching it all."

Cauldhame leaned forward in his chair. "So the figure you saw..."

"An apparition. They are common enough, they tell me, so near to the marshlands. I saw a ghost in the valley; and worse than that, I saw something of the world in which it lived."

Cauldhame shook his head. "I think you're wrong. If the valley was ever as you described it, I am sure there would have been no one living there at all. Surely the land would have been tamed a little by the first of the settlers, whoever they were."

"Perhaps you're right; but that is what I saw."

"I don't doubt you, Huntingdon, but something about your experience strikes me as odd: something more than the fact that you saw a ghost in the valley. To catch a glimpse of the past is common enough, as you said – too common, perhaps, for comfort – but these things tend to fade, with time. Why should this woman still be walking the valley, so many thousands of years after her death?"

Huntingdon did not reply; and presently, by unspoken consent, the two friends made their way to their beds.

"Quiet, girl." Kneeling down, Mara took the dog's handsome head in her arms, and scratched its grizzled fur. "Whatever it was, it's gone now."

She had glimpsed something moving through the trees, trailing smoke from its mouth and roaring as it came. Something huge, and black, with a long armoured body that caught the dead rays of the moon. She had seen a face peering from a hole in its side, a plump, red-faced man in strange black clothes. His bushy white brows were raised, as if he were surprised by what he saw. His cheeks were very round, his whiskers very white.

Then the thing was gone, as insubstantial as the smoke it left behind. But Mara had seen the man again, slipping

out of the trees and into a frozen clearing: a sad-looking figure, walking as if he bore some dreadful weight. He had turned, and seen her; but then his gaze had slipped from hers, as if he could no longer see her, and he had turned away, and made his way across the bridge. Then he was gone, and there was nothing to mark his passage, not even a ragged trail of footprints in the snow.

It was late, and Mara knew she should be seeking shelter for the night. Nevertheless, her curiosity was aroused by the apparition, and she led the hound down across the clearing, to the edge of the frozen stream. Kneeling between two shoulders of cold stone, lined with threads of copper-green moss, she tested the icy surface with her fingers. It would easily bear her weight; it seemed to have become fused to the land. Perhaps the black-clad spirit had passed this way on a night like this, a night where the deep cold of winter weighed heavy on the days, twisting them out of shape. Perhaps he had crossed the frozen stream.

Shaking her head, she rose to her feet, and climbed back to the trees, the hound at her heels.

"Nothing to see, girl. We'd best be getting back."

As she made her way along the valley's edge, something flickered at the corner of her eye, a soft white shape. She was reminded, incongruously, of the bushy white brows of the ghost. Turning her head, she saw no white bird nearby; but her gaze slipped out across the valley, and what she saw there drew a gasp from her numbed lips.

There were lights in the arm of the valley, burning like

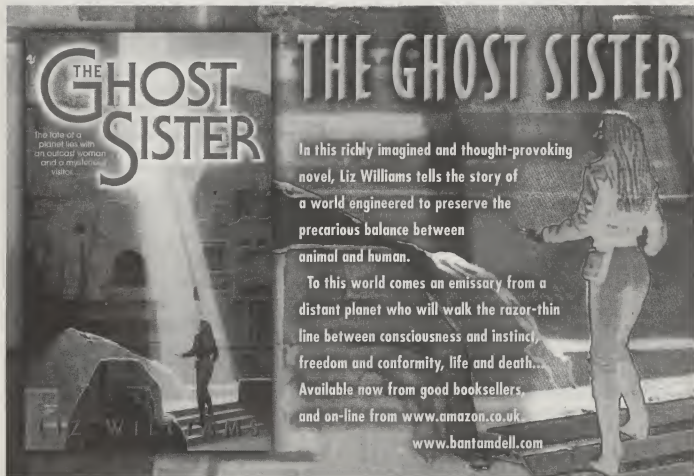
a heap of sullen coals. Huge, grey fingers of smoke rose from stern black towers, and the river glittered silver in the light of the moon.

Then the vision was gone, and all she saw was the forest, full of mist and shadows.

As she made her way home, she wondered whether she could have imagined it. But then she came to a place where the snow had melted, where the white blanket was torn away. Something was revealed beneath it: a long iron scar, a rod of rusted iron that stretched out as far as the eye could see; and, a short way away, its twin, running along beside it. Mara had seen the scar before, of course, but she had thought nothing of it until now. The first apparition, the creature of darkness and smoke, had been following the scar – for what reason, Mara would probably never know.

She turned away, and hurried home, with the hound at her side. The ghost in the valley was gone. It was curious, but nothing remarkable; and Mara was tired, and longed for her bed. Glancing up at the smiling face of the moon, she made her way with care through the world her grandfathers had made.

Alexander Glass lives in London and writes short fiction prolifically. His previous stories for *Interzone* include "Carla's Eye" (issue 130), "The Mirror Repair'd" (issue 139), "Grandma's Bubble and the Speaking Clock" (issue 143), "The Watcher's Curse" (issue 162), "The Eaters" (issue 164), "Lucid" (issue 175) and "Elysian Dreams" (issue 176).



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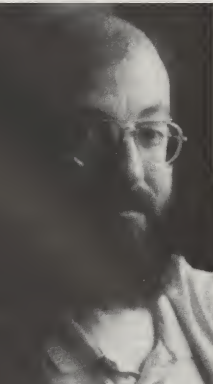
LIZ WILLIAMS

# Enormous Fun

Harry Turtledove

interviewed by

Peter T. Garratt



In the late 1980s, several things made me take notice of Harry Turtledove: a short story where the Nazis reached India and Gandhi's method of non-violent resistance is put to a stiffer test than it faced in this reality; an entry in a Ripper anthology in which Jack is a vampire; and *The Misplaced Legion*, a novel in which an educated, late-Republic Roman and his soldiers are transported to Videssos, a world which closely resembles 11th-century Byzantium – except that magic works there and dark forces are stirring.

The last is not surprising, as Turtledove has a doctorate in Byzantine studies. Unlike many historians, he also at one point studied science. His large and varied body of work includes science fiction, fantasy, historical fantasy, straight historical (under the name H.N. Turteltaub) and fantasy-mystery. The last-named genre best encompasses his evil sense of humour, as in *The Toxic Spell Dump*, an LA detective novel which resembles the work of the Kellers, except that it is set in a world where science is sidelined and magic works: spellcheckers check spells, the freeways are choked with flying carpets, and CIA spooks vanish in and out of thin air like, well, spooks.

Through most of his career, Turtle-

dove has been noted for his work in the field of Alternative History. Early on he gave us a world, in *Agent of Byzantium*, where that empire had survived intact to medieval times due to the conversion of its greatest religious opponent to Christianity. He collaborated with actor Richard Dreyfuss on *The Two Georges*, in which George III and George Washington have settled their differences, and the whole of North America is a vast, Canada-like Dominion of the Crown. Then he turned to the American Civil War. In *Guns of the South*, South African racist time-travellers supply the Confederates with 20th-century weapons: but the essentially moderate General Lee is reluctant to allow them the upper hand. Turtledove then revisited the same territory with no sf device. In *How Few Remain*, Lee has simply won, and the Civil War is re-fought a few years later. This begins an epic of pure alternative history which includes the three *Great War: American Front* novels, and *American Empire: Blood and Iron*, the start of a new trilogy in which the Confederacy, defeated at last but still just about independent, is turning to fascism.

At the same time, he was delivering a very different alternative history. The "World War" tetralogy and the "Colonization" sequel-trilogy give

us a world where alien invaders arrive bent on conquering the Earth in 1942. Their technology is not as superior as they think, and the situation is unresolved at the end of the last novel. (Though humans and aliens are starting to get along and no further instalments have been announced.) This might be seen as a pitch for a cult TV series with cast from Central Rubber-Masking, and I fear some *Interzone* readers may see it as that, but they would be wrong. The series is a masterwork of genuinely hard sf, with no Warp Drive or Matter Transmitter to get the characters out of trouble, not even an Ansible so the aliens can phone home when things don't go according to plan. Instead Turtledove has given us a slower-than-light alien civilization which works, something most sf writers don't bother to give us at all.

More recently, Turtledove has been working with what I'll call Alternative-Genre History. The "Darkness" series, so far three novels but more planned, concerns a global war in a magic-using world. This war resembles, sometimes closely, World War II; though the societies concerned are more 1914 or before. The world is more different from our own than that of Videssos: the use of sorcery more pervasive.



PTG: Your name has become more closely linked with Alternate History than any of the many other genres in which you have written. Is this a direction you intended your career to go in?

HT: I certainly always thought I would be doing some alternate history. The first novel I ever completed, just after my 16th birthday, was an alternate history that will never, ever see the light of day because it was really, really rotten. "Write what you know" has a certain amount of truth to it, and a couple of the things I know are sf and fantasy on the one hand and history on the other. Most of my work seems to group around the place where sf, fantasy, and historical fiction meet, whether it falls into alternate history (which is the more common title for the sub-genre on this side of the Atlantic), historical fantasy, or straight historical fiction. When I started out, I didn't know the A-H would be the sub-genre in which I'm most widely read. When you're starting out as a writer, you don't have any certain notion that anybody will ever want to read anything you turn out. I'm delighted people have. As you note, though, the alternate history is not all I do. I've written and sold adventure sf, moderately hard sf, historical fantasy, high fantasy, some (I hope) funny fantasy, horror, mystery fiction, YA fiction, and even mainstream fiction. Doing the same thing over and over has never much appealed to me.

PTG: Talking about your early unpublished work, I recently read an article of yours called "The Ring and I," about Tolkien and his influence. You implied that a heavily re-worked version of an early Tolkien tribute became the first Videssos series. I noticed the Byzantine parallels at the time, though I felt the masked villain and his henchmen were more totally committed to Evil than the Seljuks and other historical enemies of Byzantium. Is it intentional that most of the bad guys in your recent work, though (usually) morally worse than the others, don't have this epic attachment to Darkness?

HT: Well, what you do with both bad and good characters is in some measure a function of the story you're trying to tell. On the whole, though, I seem to find a conflict between two differing visions of what good is supposed to be more interesting than one between self-perceived good and self-perceived evil. Very few people, I think, wake up in the morning wondering, "Well, how am I going to be bad today?" Everyone is the hero in

his (or her) own story. Most of us find, to pick two big, juicy examples, Hitler and the hijackers of this past 11 September abhorrent. But Hitler was convinced he was making the world safe for Aryans, and that that was the right thing to do, and the men of 11 September were sure they died martyrs for Islam and were heading straight for heaven. Trying to look inside the head of a character with a value structure very different from your own and to make that character convincing to the reader is one of the more difficult, more interesting, and more valuable things a writer can do. Which is not to say I'll never write another piece with a Big Villain in it, if that's what the story I'm trying to tell seems to call for.

PTG: One of the things I like about *Blood and Iron* is that the character Jake Featherston, who heads a Nazi-like bunch in the Confederacy, is thoroughly unlikable: but as you imply, not aware that he is evil, and well-enough drawn that one never stops believing in him. In the "Darkness" series you have a character, King Mezentio, who plays a similar role, though so far he's nearly always in the background. Is there a reason for this?

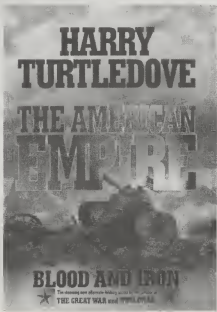
HT: Jake Featherston and King Mezentio of Algarve do have certain points in common, because they both draw parts of their character from that of Hitler, Mezentio probably with more changes than Jake. Algarve is analogous to Germany in WWII, but Algarvians aren't like Germans in national characteristics: I tried to make them villains with swagger and panache, like 15th-century Italian condottieri, rather than cold-blooded, efficient bureaucrats of death. Feath-

erston, I think, has more of Hitler's consuming rage against the world, and especially against the parts of it he doesn't care for. Mezentio stays in the background because I wanted to look at the Delravaian War mostly from the point of view of people immediately affected by it.

PTG: A question about what I'll call alternate-genre history. In the "Darkness Descending" series, you give us a world with a similar climate to our own, but a very different geography. There's only one large continent and not much of anything in the northern hemisphere. Magic works, but science in our sense is hardly mentioned. (In contrast to the *Toxic Spell Dump* world where it creeps in as a fringe study.) In the middle of the one continent is a paranoid nation, Algarve. As you say, the Algarvians don't look or behave like Germans, but they act like Nazis a lot of the time. Some incidents closely parallel WWII events: Algarvian tactics, for instance, their acquisition of a reluctant ally which resembles Finland, a surprise attack by sea. But other aspects are rather different. Algarve has more to complain about than Nazi Germany, as their enemies declare war as soon as they reclaim an Austria-like province which doesn't resist, in fact welcomes them. Hitler's enemies held back till he invaded Poland, which did resist. Later the parallels get closer again, especially when Mezentio goes to war with a vast nation headed by another deranged tyrant. So it's a variant on alternate history which doesn't use the principle of the One Big Change. What took you in this direction?

HT: It's fantasy. It's not our world. It's not our universe. Much of what goes on there is analogous to what goes on here, but it's not the same. I can change it to suit myself, without the constraints of what happened in the real world. (The same holds for *The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump*, by the way. That world looks a lot like ours, but it isn't, and isn't intended to be.) Fantasy is a game you play with a lower net than you do with alternate history. That's part of what makes it a different kind of fun to write.

PTG: I still think you've invented a new sub-genre of fantasy. Without trying to elicit spoilers, is it part of the fun to maybe visit a new ending, or at least direction, on material that looks familiar at first? And is this just fun? It's true that fun creeps into your work in the most unexpected places. The alien's version of the Warren Commission in *Aftershocks* is magnificent, and anyone who took a flight or two too many with the Dragons of



Pern will applaud the way you treat the critters. But the emotional roller-coaster of Featherston's career isn't exactly fun. (Though I enjoyed reading in a world very like ours, but where the outcome couldn't be predicted.)

HT: First off, fun to write isn't necessarily the same as fun to read. I also believe a bit of lightness helps people take the gloom; if that strategy worked for Shakespeare, who am I to argue? And if people don't keep reading to see what happens next – and, as you say, get surprised now and again – then whatever else I do doesn't matter anyhow, does it? If I make people thoughtful as well as entertained, that's fine. If I make them thoughtful without entertaining them, then I might as well write academic non-fiction. I've done that, but I don't like it as well as writing fiction, and I doubt I could make a living at it. A friend of mine who's currently an assistant dean at UCLA but started out teaching the history of medieval England there began a historical novel once, only to discover he couldn't leave the footnotes out. My trouble in academia was the opposite; I didn't want to put them in. I worked on my first novel that sold in parallel with my doctoral dissertation, which made the thesis take about a year longer than it would have otherwise. Only fair, I suppose: I came into Byzantine history through science fiction, and left through the same door.

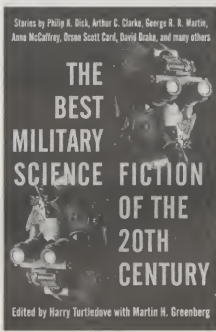
PTG: Changing emphasis slightly, one development I've noticed in your work is an increase in the number and diversity of viewpoints that you use. In the "Misplaced Legion" series, you did use multiple viewpoints, but my memory is that they were mostly from the group around the hero Marcus, who got scattered around the Videssos world, but eventually are mostly back together. Nowadays all your series seem to use lots of viewpoint characters from several combatant nations and many walks of life. They don't necessarily interact with each other. I found this a bit hard to get used to, though now I'm hooked on it. Deliberate pun: this means the novel's hook isn't as sharp and near the front as some writing experts would require, though several sleepless nights indicate that one does get to it. Any comments on the development of this strategy?

HT: If you're writing a book where you're trying to cover an enormous canvas, you can't possibly do it all. So you put in dots here and there and let the readers who are looking at the dots fill in the rest of the canvas with their imagination. It's sort of a pointil-

istic narrative technique. I think it only works for large canvases. Otherwise, you don't have time to develop the characters and let the reader get to know them. In that case, there's too much white space between the dots, and no real picture emerges. Typically, by the time a series finishes, I will have written a short novel's worth about each viewpoint character who makes it through to the end. Shifting from one viewpoint character to another also has the advantage of keeping me fresh as a writer, because I have to change my perspective on the story as I change characters.

PTG: You refer to some viewpoint characters not making it to the end. You are braver than a lot of feelgood writers who seldom kill a viewpoint character, especially a sympathetic one. Sometime the viewpoint is handed on like a baton: a soldier dies, his trench mate takes his place. I think, but can't swear without extensive re-reading, that this is a new development. Is that so? Is it a conscious innovation, or did it just seem the right way to go?

HT: I've killed off characters whom people like throughout my career, I think – the Emperor Mavrikios Gavras and Balsamon the patriarch in "The Videssos Cycle," for instance. In situations like the two World Wars, it strikes me as dishonest to make the readers try to believe everybody would come through fine. They were demographic catastrophes. Having multiple viewpoint characters also helps me get away with this, for the reader's emotional energy isn't all invested in one individual.



PTG: Yes, and it imparts an emotional energy to the writing like the flow of a great river. I used to be doubtful about multiple viewpoints, partly because they're common in mystery-thriller type books, which too often are neither mysterious nor thrilling, but I'm converted to it for this type of epic-scale series. How about the use of "real" historical characters? *The Two Georges* is full of recognizable individuals in a world 200 years diverged from this one. In a lot of your books, however, you seem to have a rule of thumb that characters alive at the turning point continue, not always in the way they did in this reality, but those born after the change are usually fictitious. Is this to avoid embarrassment, or do you think that a diverged alternate would be unlikely to produce exactly the same individuals?

HT: *The Two Georges* wasn't entirely mine; if it had been, it wouldn't have looked the same. I'm sure Richard Dreyfuss would say the same thing. There's always give and take in collaborations. I don't think this one's all bad – though I wouldn't have done it to the same degree myself, it gives the reader less familiar with the concept of alternate history an immediate notion of changed circumstances. In work that's all my own, I'm less likely to use people born after the change, though I will now and again to make a point I can't make so well with purely invented characters – in *American Empire: Blood and Iron*, Upton Sinclair is a case in point. I certainly would think that the people who are born change more as you get further down the timestream from the break point. In the "Great War" books, General Daniel MacArthur is a case in point; he's not Douglas MacArthur, but rather the younger, similar, but not identical son Arthur MacArthur (also a professional soldier) had in this new universe.

PTG: I'm assuming you work on the model that in an alternate timeline even people who get through more or less OK may have different family structures, for instance getting home and starting a family earlier or later, or falling for someone they didn't meet in our reality, so before long the uniforms may be the same but the individuals are different. I wish I could remember the author and title of a story I read many years ago, a sort of determinist alternate history, in which the viewpoint character keeps slipping into new parallel worlds. He always finds that the leaders and great figures of the present and past have different names but the outcome is the same. The South never wins in this

set of worlds. Do you, as a historian, feel that determinism has run out of steam? In *Timescape*, Gregory Benford uses Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle to undermine it. Can personalities (or lost horseshoes) make that much difference?

HT: I haven't been a working historian for going on 20 years now. I tell lies for a living – I hope they're plausible and interesting lies, because otherwise I don't eat, but that's what they are: lies. This, of course, doesn't mean that I don't have opinions on what you asked, but they're only opinions. In this particular instance, anybody's opinions are only opinions, because the question isn't subject to experiment. I believe there's a blend of things that goes into making history, that economic and social forces are very important, but that individuals play roles, too. I think the world would be a very different place if the careers of Alexander, Jesus and Muhammad, to name the first three who spring to mind, had not happened or had gone differently. (And Alexander's, for instance, which in real history shaped the whole Hellenistic world, might well have – indeed, it would have, if his father, Philip of Macedon, hadn't been assassinated at a feast. Philip was contemplating the invasion of Persia, but planned to stop once he got to Mesopotamia – take the good stuff, and leave the rest. Would half the Near East have become permanently Hellenized? Who can say?)

PTG: I hadn't been aware of the Philip stuff. I don't value your opinion any less for not working as an historian. You seem to have held onto attitudes presumably going right back to your prehistory as a science student... e.g. experiment is important. One advantage of working in sf has to be that most sf writers and fans are almost as sceptical as academics about what they believe, but much more open about what they'll discuss. Do you have any thoughts about the place of history in a world dominated by science and technology? Is history misplaced among the humanities, and should it try to get closer to the sciences?

HT: History is about understanding people and how they work and work together – and about how they too often don't. I don't think it can be a science; we've got an overwhelming amount of all sorts of data, and we lack and probably will always lack the analytical tools to handle that enormous glut of information. And everything happens only once; it's not susceptible to experiment. To me, at least, that takes it out of the sciences.

We just have to do the best we can.

PTG: It's clear that some points in history attract you. Is this because they are turning points, or do you look for a turning point for an alternate in a period you're at home with? And do you have any turning points you are attached to which other people haven't picked up on?

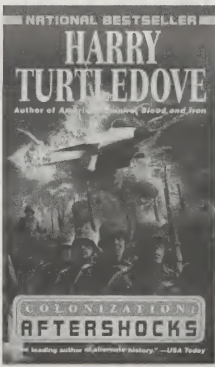
HT: Turning points, I think, need to be situations where things could plausibly have gone either way. They need to be known to a reasonably wide number of people (I can come up with several Byzantine ones, for instance, that have considerable importance, but where everybody would go, "Well, so what?" – and where I'd get bogged down in endless exposition getting the point across to people who didn't do the same work in grad school as I did: which is to say, the whole rest of the world). And I need to be able to find some (I hope) interesting story springing from the change. Three change points that I've looked at that I don't think anyone else has are *Homo erectus* getting to the New World and the Native American *Homo sapiens* failing to do so (the stories collected in *A Different Flesh*), Mohammed's conversion to Christianity on a trading run up into Syria (the stories collected in *Agent of Byzantium*), and the Germans and Russians fighting to a WWII draw and Normandy failing ("Ready for the Fatherland").

Pause for commercial announcement... Next standalone novel, coming this November, is called *Ruled Britannia*, and is set in 1597-98 in an Eng-

land where the Armada won. I know Keith Roberts and John Brunner have been over that ground before in *Pavane* and *Times Without Number*, but they're looking at things much further past the breakpoint. My two viewpoint characters are Shakespeare and the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega, who really did sail in the Armada. Shakespeare is involved in a plot to get Elizabeth out of the Tower when Philip of Spain dies, and has to write and put on a play helping to rouse a rebellion (as in actuality Essex had a company present *Richard II*, showing the deposition of a sovereign, when he rebelled against Elizabeth in 1602). Lope is trying to stop him. For a large variety of reasons, far and away the hardest thing I've ever tried.

PTG: I'm very excited to hear about this Elizabethan alternate. It's currently my favourite period. I have my own alternate version, in which a couple of my stories published as mysteries are set, but mine only differs from our reality in that Hamlet has reached England and is working as a Privileged Investigator. (Well how else would he earn a living?) I don't want spoilers, but your readers would appreciate a few teasers. How do you approach the great Shakespeare mystery, that none of his personal papers survived and we know very little about him as a person? Ian Wilson, in *Shakespeare: The Evidence* (not the Ian Wilson who wrote a novel about the Dark Lady), puts up fairly convincing evidence that Shakespeare may have had Catholic sympathies. Teasers, no spoilers!

HT: It does seem that Shakespeare came from a crypto-Catholic family. If the Armada had won, there would have been four shifts in religion in one reasonably long lifetime: Catholic to Protestant under Henry VIII, Protestant to Catholic under Mary, Catholic to Protestant under Elizabeth, and then Protestant to Catholic under the Spaniards (I have Philip's daughter Isabella on the throne; that appears to have been his intention, as he had a distant claim through Plantagenet descent, and had of course unhappily been Mary's husband). I suspect that that (to say nothing of the fact that, if the English rebellion succeeded, a fifth shift would follow) would have lent a lot of folks a certain amount of expedience and cynicism about the entire process. The issue of Shakespeare's papers doesn't really arise; I have him as a working player and playwright in London, in mid-career, a career a little less distinguished than in our world, mostly because – not spoiling anything much



– Marlowe survives in this world, which means Shakespeare doesn't outshine the rest of the crowd by quite so much.

PTG: You said earlier that this was a very hard book to write. It's bound to interest your UK and *Interzone*-reading fans, so any non-spoiler clues as to why that was?

HT: Writing in a dialect not naturally my own, trying to do so in a way intelligible to the modern reader, and trying to sneak in quotations and adaptations from Shakespeare and his contemporaries that would advance the story and – except where I intended them to be – wouldn't be obvious.

PTG: Let's move over to the "World War/Colonization" series. There seem to be two reactions to this. People who haven't read it say: "It's got intelligent invading lizards so it must be like 'Q'." People who have tried it say: "It's not like 'Q' and it's really good." My feeling was that you had tried to write an interplanetary series with few if any devices that wouldn't be approved by the harder scientists among us. Have I missed any? Or is this a genuine hard-sf mega-series?

HT: I never really thought about it in those terms. I set up the universe the way I did for the sake of the story I wanted to tell. If the Lizards knew how to travel faster than light, they could get to Earth, see they were running into a bigger problem than they expected, send a message back to Home saying, "We need another 20,000,000 soldiers and four more shiploads of nukes," and conquer us in six weeks instead of the three they'd originally planned. While dealing with a defeated Earth could be interesting, too, it wasn't what I had in mind doing at the time. And so I didn't let the Lizards know anything Einstein wouldn't have approved of. If the story had been different, the universe in which it was set would also have been different.

PTG: Is SETI an interest of yours? My thoughts on how you've done this series include:

– If FTL does exist, and is convenient, we're back to the question, "Why aren't they here yet?"

– Making STL possible would require very long-term planning;

– a race who could do that might tend to do things with less urgency than we do. Do you think it's a greater challenge, putting it into an Einsteinian universe? It seems to work.

HT: One obvious answer to the "Why aren't they here yet?" question is: "We're lousy real estate." Another, given the state of the world these days, is, "Who says they're not? Do you think we'd be dumb enough to do all this to ourselves?" Ted Sturgeon wrote a story along those lines 30-odd years ago now. The Lizards certainly are a race that does things with less urgency than we do. I suspect we're unusual; we've broken out in technology the way teenagers break out in acne. Does it have to be that way? I have my doubts, anyway. For this particular story, as I've noted, doing it in a universe where the Lizards knew how to go FTL would have been a disaster. I'm glad you like the way it's turned out.

PTG: Your new collection *Counting Up, Counting Down* begins and ends with two stories which are in essence different takes on the same events. What gave you this idea? I know you won't say which was written first, but maybe you can hint as to how accurate people's guesses are.

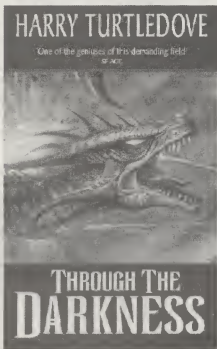
HT: I got the idea for "Forty, Counting Down" and "Twenty-one, Counting Up," and for how I wanted them to be presented, in the summer of '97. Bounced it off my wife, and she thought it was interesting, if strange – not the direction in which I usually go. Doing the two stories so they were mutual reflections intrigued me; it put me in mind of the Escher sketch where the two hands with pencils are drawing each other. I pitched the idea of the two stories in the two magazines at the same time to Gardner

Dozois of *Asimov's* and Stan Schmidt of *Analog* at the '97 Worldcon in San Antonio, Texas – and then I dithered till the following summer before finally writing them. I submitted both stories to both editors, with a letter reminding them both of what I was doing. I expected Stan was more likely to buy "40" and Gardner "21"; turned out I had it backwards. They're an interesting litmus test of people's ages. Those under 30 tend to like "21" better; those over 30 like "40" better. Maybe this means I got the mindset of the protagonist at his two ages somewhere close to right. I dare hope so, anyhow. Those two are optioned in Hollywood. Of course, many are optioned, few are filmed.

PTG: *Counting* includes some non-historical stuff, as well as Videssos material and a Tolkien tribute, but most of the stories have a historical component. I gather you have now published some "straight" historical novels, using an alternate version of your name for marketing reasons. Would you like to say something about these, and about venturing beyond the edge of the sf/fantasy world?

HT: The straight historicals – one Byzantine and four contracted for set during the wars of Alexander's successors (the first one, *Over the Wine-Dark Sea*, is out, and the second, *The Gryphon's Skull*, will appear this Fall) – are enormous fun to research and write. For example, in *Over the Wine-Dark Sea* I was trying to fit the peregrinations of my Rhodian merchant galley in with a Roman sea attack on Pompeii during the Second Samnite War and with a solar eclipse over Syracuse in August of 310 BC. Like a lot of science-fiction writers, I'm very fond of C. S. Forester's and Patrick O'Brian's work. I can't write Napoleonic seafaring adventure; I'll never know enough. But Hellenistic seafaring adventure is another story, in that I know more and there's less to know – both of which work in my favour. If the fates are kind, H.N. Turteltaub (who looks a lot like me) will write a long series of these; the couple of generations following Alexander's death are one of the most crowded, exciting and important periods in history, with lots of room for adventure fiction.

PTG's final comment: "Enormous fun" – that's Harry Turtledove's attitude to his work, and it's my reaction to reading it. But there's a serious aspect as well. Watch out for Jake Featherston and King Mezentio. They're not finished. **12**





In February *Interzone* ran my reminiscence of James White, mentioning his fondness for E. E. "Doc" Smith and his delight at winning the Skylark award presented in Smith's memory by the New England SF Association. Also in February, to my complete surprise, NESFA gave the 2002 Skylark to me. The trophy is a huge lens and – as past winner Jane Yolen learned when it ignited her favourite coat – is best kept where the sun does not shine...

## THE GALAXY PRIMES

**Isaac Asimov's** death ten years ago (in April 1992) was hastened by AIDS, according to the new autobiography *Isaac Asimov: It's Been a Good Life* edited by his widow Janet Jeppson. He was given an infected blood transfusion during 1983 heart bypass surgery.

**Arthur C. Clarke** is reading classic sf: "Just found this flawless gem for Thog's Masterclass (which I always read with apprehension): He lit the dining room lamp, got out a cigar, and began pacing the room, ejaculating...' You might try it sometime! The source: *The Invisible Man*, Chapter 17 – I'm writing the intro for a new edition, but don't think I'll quote this..." Told that Thog had cited a similar Wells usage in *The War of the Worlds*, ACC got excited: "I think we have the makings of a Ph.D. thesis here."

**Simon R. Green** probes the heart of the British TV market with a well-sharpened stake: "A TV writer I know recently submitted a vampire series to Brit TV, and was told, 'We like the scripts, but do they have to be vampires? Couldn't they be AIDS victims instead?'"

**Stephen Laws**, UK horror author, is "recovering after abdominal surgery to correct a chronic case of the wibbles," wrote Steve Gallagher on 3 March. "The keyhole surgery, which appears to have been successful and effective, required no fewer than five entry points and, according to Laws, 'I now look like Warren Oates at the end of *The Wild Bunch*.'"

**Alan Moore** failed to get a name-check when the *Spectator* film reviewer wrote that *From Hell* "might be quite an entertaining twist on the old Ripper tale, mainly because it was based on a graphic novel by some hairy man who is widely thought of in graphic novel circles, wherever they may be." (Review summary: good twist, bad everything else.)

**William F. Nolan** was named as this year's International Horror Guild "Living Legend," for his lifetime influence on horror and dark fantasy.

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Awards.** *British Book Awards* ("Nibbies") for 2001 went to Philip Pullman as author of the year, Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* as children's book and HarperCollins as publisher. *International Horror Guild* shortlists... Novel: *Coldheart Canyon*, Clive Barker; *The Living Blood*, Tananarive Due; *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman; *Sex and Violence in Hollywood*, Ray Garton; *Threshold* by Caitlin R. Kiernan; *Black House*, Stephen King and Peter Straub. First Novel: *Bitten*, Kelley Armstrong; *The Astonished Eye*, Tracy Knight; *Riverwatch*, Joseph Nassise; *Moonlight*, Erin Patrick; *Ordinary Horror*, David Searcy. Too many other categories to list; familiar British names include Ramsey Campbell (short story, anthology, subject of nonfiction book) and Stephen Jones (anthology).

**Thog's Metaphor Masterclass.** "In general, those bemoaning the commercial horse latitudes on which science fiction presently finds itself slowly twisting in the wind..." (Norman Spinrad, *Asimov's*)

**Small Press.** Fictionwise.com's latest royalty statement comes with a circular that discreetly mentions: "As some of you know, we no longer pay advances because of market conditions and other factors..."

**R.I.P. Virginia Hamilton** (1936-2002), US author of children's fiction – including fantasies and some notable sf – died from breast cancer on 19 February. At 65 she'd won all the major awards in her field, and was the only children's author so far to receive a MacArthur "genius" grant. *Chuck Jones* (1912-2002), the legendary US cartoon animator, director, author and artist who made over 300 animated films, died of

congestive heart failure on 22 February; he was 89. His best-known creations were the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote. He received three Oscars as director and an honorary Oscar for life achievement. *Spike Milligan* (1919-2002), last of the Goons, died at home on 27 February, aged 83. Besides the surreal fantasy of *The Goon Show* itself, he featured in several science-fictional productions including *The Bed-Sitting Room* (1969 film based on 1963 play co-written with John Antrobus) and *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. *Harry Nadler*, UK fan since the 1960s, amateur genre film-maker, and chief organizer of the Festival of Fantastic Films for the last 13 years, died from a heart attack on 1 March. Steve Gallagher fondly recalls his infectious enthusiasm: "Not many film fans mobilize friends and family to buy, renovate and run their own cinema, as Harry did with *The Savoy in Sale*, Cheshire."

**As Others See Us.** *The New York Times* e-mail Books Update notes that the blurb on Doris Lessing's latest novel features "...the publisher's statement that this book marks Lessing's return to 'realistic fiction.' Rockwell, the editor of *The New York Times Arts & Leisure* section, says this blurb may reflect the lingering disappointment felt by some Lessing fans about her voyage into imaginative storytelling and about her "space fiction" in particular." Another poor stray welcomed back to the fold after years of slumming around in imaginative storytelling.

**Andromeda Bookshop** in Birmingham faced an uncertain future after a mid-February creditor's meeting described by Andromeda's Rog Peyton as a non-event. There were hopes of raising funds to buy the assets of the world's oldest SF bookshop and start a new business, with shares on offer at £5,000 apiece.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of Temporal Science.* "The remains gave off a strong earth smell. It suggested great age, century piled upon century in which this jumble of now articulated bones had lain forgotten in the volcanic silt of John Day Canyon. They had been ancient already when Christ reportedly spun fishes and loaves from thin air. Older still when Moses allegedly parted the Red Sea." (Kirk Mitchell, *Ancient Ones*, 2001) *Dept of Strange Endowments.* "Her slender chest rose and fell gently and slowly with her sleeping inhalations, her small breasts and rather larger nipples outdenting the flimsy fabric of her ragged tunic..." (Fritz Leiber, *The Knight and Knaves of Swords*, 1988)



# The Eight-Moon Dollar

Daniel Kaysen

I wished Plan Man weren't so anti-smoking.

It was my 18th birthday. I was lying on my Dad's bed with the girl next door, who'd just given me my coming-of-age present. She'd even swallowed.

A cigarette would have been perfect.

But when I told her, Laura did that over-exaggerated coughing that over-serious fitness-freak children of heavy smokers tend to do. "You not smoking is the one good thing about your Dad being Plan Man," she said. Laura's family were Indie, and rich Indie at that. "Emphysema is not the Romeo-and-Juliet death I was thinking of."

I laughed as though I knew what a Romeo-and-Juliet death was. Laura's mother had made a big show of showing the Plan Man boyfriend an illegal 2D starring Claire Danes and some dead boy, but I fell asleep about 20 minutes in. How anyone ever stayed awake for 2Ds I'll never know.

"Bullshit," I said. "If we weren't Plan Man, Dad would be... well, we'd be living in a trailer somewhere instead of living next door to you." Dad ranked number five in the chart of motion-capture/dubbing box-office clout, according to *PM Variety*, based on his ordinary aw-shucks charm, a physique he worked five hours a day on, and the way he could make talking with a woman about the weather seem incredibly sexually charged.

He could open virtually any PM feature except the really heavy-duty zen ones, which no one could open anyway. PM kept waiting for the audience for them to evolve. They would have a wait.

So, PM had been good to us. That meant a nice house, a rosy future, and absolutely no rock'n'roll or drugs or unapproved sex acts. Unfortunately, Laura had some interesting ideas along the latter lines, which she shared with me sometimes, in bed.

"Is this in the approved list?" she would whisper, starting something up that went right to my lizard brain.

Sometimes I couldn't even say the word "No." I just shook my head and thought of our bank balance.

"Or this, then?" she would purr.

Oh, Jesus Christ. A few times I longed to be in a car crash and have just enough brain damage to forget what was in the approved list and what wasn't. Or at least to forget the moons, orbiting above, that had the imaging power to see through bricks. My Dad had told me that when I first announced I had a girlfriend.

"Either do it where they can't see through, or do it approved," he said, intently.

When I questioned him further it turned out that bank-vaults or nuclear bunkers were my only real hope of truly unseen experimentation.

"Don't be stupid," said Laura, when I told her of my plan to find an old fall-out shelter. "The moons can't see through brick! Read the papers!"

"I do read the papers," I said lamely.

"Yeah, *PM Variety*, *PM Star*, *PM College Hoops*. Like that's a balanced diet of worldviews. Anyway," she said significantly, "for marrieds the approved list is longer. Much longer. We could have full sex, everything." She looked down at my involuntary reaction. "How romantic! A proposal."

"Plan Man would drop us like a rock if I married you."

"Tom, don't you see? They've *bought* you. They buy everything, everywhere. MicroFox, NASA, Disneyland. The house the other side, the -"

"What, they've bought next door?"

That meant some Plan Man high-ups breathing down our necks. Dad was staying in the city for the night. This wasn't going to be the happiest of news to break to him tomorrow.

As it was, he broke the news to me.

He knocked on his own bedroom door at 9.30 the next morning. I felt bad about that, being there, but Laura had this real thing about his bedroom. And as long as it wasn't on the blacklist, I went with things that Laura had a real thing for. It tended to brighten up my life.

"Uh, come in," I said, checking that we were both sufficiently covered by the duvet.

Dad appeared. "The new neighbours dropped by, they're in the kitchen. Laura you better go out the back. Sorry, honey, but -"

"I know, it's cool," she said. Then she got out of bed so Dad got a view of her somewhat skimpy nightwear, and went into the bathroom.

Dad, unfazed, came over and whispered to me. "Tom, I want you downstairs in five. The neighbour used to be head of PM-Cable, so no messing. She could get me sacked in an hour."

"Is her husband there?"

"No, her husband's dead. It's just her and her daughter."

ter. The daughter's 24 and she kind of smoulders so remember you're spoken for and keep your dick zipped. There's politics here, okay?"

"Ten four."

Five minutes later Laura was gone and I was downstairs, doing my best delighted-to-meet-you, isn't – Plan-Man-just-peachy routine. As if it made any difference.

They were quite something. The four of us sat round the breakfast table, and if I've tasted more uncomfortable coffee I can't remember it. I could see why the mother had been snapped up by PM, though. I thought she was going to draw up a restructuring plan every time she put down her cup. She radiated business power. And she didn't do humour.

The daughter, Jeanne, wasn't a barrel of laughs, either. For a start it was obvious she wasn't impressed by Dad – I'd never seen anyone so off-hand in saying hello. Some people *try* to act cool, but you can see in their eyes that they're still responding to his fame, even though they're determined not to show it. But the daughter simply gazed out the window, with a faint look of sourness around her lips.

She barely nodded at me. I guessed that that dick/zipped thing wasn't going to be so difficult.

The visit lasted 20 minutes, in which time ten of my Dad's anti-Indie jokes, and 30 loyal statements about Plan Man, hit the floor unregarded. Then they thanked us distantly and left. Not managing to invite us for a return match in the process.

We watched as O'Shea buzzed them out through the security gate.

"That went well," said my father, looking nervous. "I hate it when the high-ups are so high up they don't have to prove their loyalty. I can never figure out the right the thing to say."

We both sat in silence for a while until O'Shea came through again. The screen showed it was Laura. In her aerobics stuff. My Dad raised an eyebrow a centimetre.

"Hi Mr C," she said, when she came in. "What do you think?" She gestured at her body. "Looking toned, right?"

"Uh, right," said my Dad, baffled by the invited inspection. "You kids go listen to music. I've got looping all day. I'm just off. Be good."

"Bye Mr C," said Laura.

We went to my room and listened to music, amongst other activities. Like getting a second instalment of my birthday present. But the weirdest thing happened. Just as I was about to climax I suddenly flashed on having sex with the Plan Man woman's daughter. And something deep in me went to this new place, like a higher-level.

When I came I think O'Shea outside probably heard it. Maybe even the daughter did.

"Wow," said Laura, smiling too brightly, after a while. "What was all that about?"

"Your aerobics stuff," I said, the best I could do. I couldn't even make eye-contact. I was angry and guilty and generally a bit fucked up.

She relaxed a bit. "In that case I'll come round tomorrow – same time same outfit."

"Don't bother, my Dad won't be here then," I said coldly, with that sick knowledge that I was picking a fight for no

rational reason other than my lizard brain wanted to.

"What does *that* mean?"

I looked at her, and the small voice of reason got drowned out. "Does it bother you that I'm older than you?"

"By two weeks!"

"You like older men, then, is that it?"

"Where is this going, Tom?" She was sub-zero now.

"He's gay, you know. So you're wasting your efforts."

"Hello? Your Dad's dating Tienka. It's on the PM channels every 20 minutes."

"So where is she, then? Compared to how many times his friend Pete's been here."

"Tom, I know your Dad, okay? He's straight. I've seen him look at me."

"That's because you look like a boy," said the lizard. It was unforgivable (and untrue), and she didn't forgive it.

"See you around," she said. "Oh, and I think you've got senile dementia. Now you're so old."

She walked out the door.

And that was how her death began.

Only when the front door slammed did my weird red mist subside, to be replaced by that terrible heavyweight ice in my stomach, half guilt, half fear for the consequences.

Plan Man were not big on homosexuality. Not big at all.

My view was that Plan Man were way too dogmatic, and that people should be left alone to be what they are, but I'd never said that to Dad. Plan Man put the multi-million roof over our heads, and I knew better than to pick a fight with Dad over it. His nearest Anglo competitor in the star rankings, Malcolm Y, refused to work for Plan Man when they put the eighth extra moons up, and the last we heard he was in underground Indie actioners, doing his own stunts.

Dad took the eight-moon dollar and kept his mouth shut, and encouraged me to do the same. I'd asked him what he thought of the moons once, trying to pick a fight.

"Can you tell which one's the real one?" he said.

"No, but –"

"Then you don't know for sure you're being watched."

"But –"

"Kiddo, when you're older you'll understand."

Now I was older. And now I understood why he didn't put up a fight. Plan Man paid the mortgage, and he loved the job even though it wasn't real acting, just spending endless hours in motion for their computers to first capture him, and then to dub him over the original Plan Man holos. Not that he saw the originals. No one did, not even in Plan Man. Or at least, not the humans.

And now I'd finished with Laura and told her the truth about Dad.

That was bad news. Laura had that little-rich-girl attitude to grudges: don't just bear them, put them to work. And her family's money was entirely unrelated to Plan Man. They were in agribusiness, something untouched by PM. In fact, anything bad for PM was good for them.

Oh, shit. I picked up the phone.

"Hey," I said, gently, when she answered. "I'm sorry, Laur, I'm really sorry."

"You sounded so cold, like you hated me."

"Of course I don't hate you," I said. And the gap in which I was meant to say I loved her hung there like a satellite.

"Well, maybe I hate you," she said. "Have you considered that?"

"Yeah, that's why I rang. I don't want to lose you."

"You don't?"

"No, of course not."

"Why not?" Back to the hanging gap.

"You know why not," I said.

"I don't think I do know, not after this morning."

There was a long pause then, my last chance to tell her I loved her. It would have been such a simple lie, but lizards held my tongue. And then the click as she ended the call.

I looked out of the window to see a moon rising. Had to be a bad one. Had to be.

The solution I came up with seemed so obvious, so fated, so purely rational that I told myself it had nothing to do with the sexual bolt of lightning earlier.

I went out the front gate past O'Shea, turned left, walked 50 yards and introduced myself to the stern young man in the Plan Man Security uniform at the guard point next door.

"To see whom?" he said.

See, even the hourly workers do grammar courses, for Plan Man.

"Jeanne," I said. "It's a company matter."

He didn't blink, although we both knew it sounded preposterous. He excused himself, made the call, and astoundingly he buzzed me through.

"Ms Harper's by the pool," he said.

I walked away before he could see me go red. Pool meant swimming. Swimming meant swimming costume. Swimming costume meant...

"Mr Curtis," said the guard's voice behind me. I turned and went back to him, sure he'd changed his mind about letting me in. But instead he whispered "Be careful." I noticed he covered his mike with his hand as he said it. Jesus.

"Right," I said, and walked towards the house.

Well, yeah, too right. Jeanne Harper could have my Dad's career on the barbecue in a flash, if she had a quiet word with Mum. So I was going to have to watch my step, and mind my Ps and Qs, and do that dick/zipped routine until, well... On the other hand Laura could sell her eye-witness story to the non-approved press and bring us down just as quick. Plan Man didn't stand by its servants, however loyal. So I told myself that by taking this matter to Jeanne I was doing entirely the right and rational thing.

By the time I'd reached the house, and rounded it, I was into the polish on my monologue, practising my confidential-but-worried voice under my breath, while trying not to think of bikinis.

And then I saw her by the pool and all that bikini fantasy dropped like a thud. Jeanne was topless on a towel, leaning on her elbow, waiting for me. Looking bored.

"Hi," she said. I couldn't see her eyes behind her

reflecting sunglasses, and for that I was grateful.

"Nice shades," I said. It just came out, as something to say, but it worked.

Jeanne Harper laughed. It was an okay laugh.

"Thank you," she said. And she took the shades off and waited for my next line.

I didn't have a next line. All my spontaneous genius had been used up, and I was left with a feeling of something beyond every longing I'd ever had. I looked into her eyes with all my concentration, staring like a madman, and she just looked back, weighing me up.

Then she gave the briefest glance down to the crotch of my jeans, and then back to my eyes.

"Well, you're pleased to see me."

"Yeah," I said, and I went into the same mode I'd gone into for interviews at college: Just talk. A lot. "I'm pleased to see you because I'm glad I caught you in, I have a problem I'd like to discuss. See, we're Plan Man employed via MicroFox, which is PM subsid, of course, and the thing is my neighbour the other side is threatening blackmail over my father's personal life, and I'm sure you're aware my father is a considerable public face of the Plan Man entertainment strategy and I'm sure it's in everyone's interest that blackmail threats be nipped in the bud before..."

And I talked on and gave up meeting her eyes and looked at the pool instead, watched how the water was shimmering like the Hockney we had up at home, and I thought how the bad moon rising didn't look so bad through the perfect blue, and I thought how sex with Jeanne had become inevitable, like history unwinding itself perfectly into the future. I talked about Tienka, and how much my father really liked her, and how perhaps my father wasn't bringing her home because he didn't want to seem to be replacing my dead mother, so I guess he was protecting me from that sort of tension, and how I guess I just wanted advice, really, about how to deal with this situation. And I focused on the bad moon very hard, as it side-stepped and swerved on the surface of the pool.

"Do you know their cameras have got enough resolution up there to read our lips?" she said, indicating the moon.

"That's pretty amazing," I said, hoping that was enthusiastic enough. I knew enough not to sound the slightest bit concerned. I'd picked that up from Dad. Never sound suspicious of the Plan Man surveillance capabilities. Not if you want to get on. Not if you want life nice and smooth and multi-million roofed.

"That's right," she said. "It is pretty amazing. So if I stand up and take off the rest of my bikini -"

- and she did, and I watched -

- and face the moon fully, and say 'Fuck you, Plan Man master-race-motherfuckers' then there's a very good chance they'll pick it up." And she smiled and turned so she was facing me, full frontal. "But you have to be naked when you say it. The human drones who analyze the signals spend their spare time writing routines to search for nudity. Female nudity, oddly enough. Did you know that? So a really good way to get your message up to the moon is to be naked. If you're a woman."

I didn't even try to smile. My entire repertoire of social words and gestures had drained from my mind. I just

stood there, watching her.

Then she gave a little grunt, sat back on her towel, and reached for a pack of cigarettes. She lit one and exhaled. I didn't ask for one. In PM there's one rule for the high-ups and one for everyone else. "Your support for your father is touching but let's face it, he flames. Tienka's a dyke of course, tut-tut.

"Look, Tom. I should warn you that you are so far out of your depth you probably can't begin to imagine how fucked-up this is all going to get if you don't turn and walk back to the gate, thank the guard for his warning to be careful, go home and jerk off over the five minutes you spent five feet from my puss."

Did I walk? I was 18. I didn't move a centimetre.

"If you stay that means you're in. Are you in? In for whatever? I've got moves you've never seen."

"I'm in," I said.

And then we went to bed.

When time restarted again we were lying next to each other on her bed, my every pore singing some fire-song I'd never dreamt of. Several times I'd felt the individual atoms of me fretting at their bonds. I felt the universe...

"No you didn't," she said, "that was your prostate."

"No, I felt it," I said. "It was completion."

"Want a replay?" Jeanne said. I moved towards her. "Not that kind of replay. I mean on the net."

"The net?"

"How else do you think the moonbros top-up their commission? Hot voyeur downloads." She pointed over my shoulder at a different moon framed in the window. "That session probably only goes for five bucks a minute max, I guess. I know the search codes. You got a credit card?"

I found my wallet and she scanned in the card and we watched the download, just as she'd promised. It went on for a long time. It cost me 300 dollars. I didn't even see much of it, because we started again, in weird quadrophonic, the net me and Jeanne in counterpart to the us in reality.

Time came together again.

When I opened my eyes Jeanne was holding a gun.

She sighed. "A solution to our problem."

I felt alive to the meaning of everything, but the meaning of the gun was cloudy to me.

"Come on, Tom, think. Plan Man doctrine about conflict resolution. Logo number four. It's on the trailers for your Dad's films. It's the mouthful one."

"Violence is the last and worst resort. But in the last resort, use it with prayer and sorrow."

"Good, and how does this apply here?"

"Here?" I said.

"How does it apply to your problem?"

"Any problems I had are not problems any more," I said.

"Apart from Laura and her blackmail threat. If she goes ahead with it you think he'd ever work again?"

"Laura is irrelevant," I said. "She's young. She doesn't understand."

"Oh yeah? Why else do you think Laura's family moved in next to you? They're after him. Laura's laying video-

bugs in his bedroom. They've got a live feed there, waiting for him to slip up. Bless her. We've taken it out three times and it just keeps coming back. If she wasn't getting your rocks off they'd have killed her months ago. But they can't afford that sort of coverage. Too much murk."

"But -"

"But the video's kind of a side-line, now that you've outed your Dad on the phone. She's undoubtedly recorded that. There's only two solutions, I guess, prayerful violence is one."

I didn't like the sound of that. "And the other?"

"Sorrowful violence, I guess. If you don't kill Laura she'll get your taped confession about your father on to one of the broadband illegals. Plan Man rescind your father's contract 20 minutes before the news goes worldwide. You move out three hours after, to a hole in the wall in the city. Of course since Malcolm Y died from AIDS, doing bareback porn for crack, he's left a nice little niche for your father in micro-budgets, until he burns out in a couple of years. You'll be blacklisted of course, no PM job, no PM service, no PM entertainment ever again, everything underground and Indie, forever. Plan Man will wash their hands of you, you'll never see nice sheets again, let alone hot sex with high-level Plan Man family like me."

"But Laura's -"

"Laura's life will be even worse than yours, once PM catch up with her. She'll be a moonbros, watching car registration interps for errors. She'll be mad in a year, and then when she can't even clean floors she'll be killed. At least this way she'll die happy. Ring her up, tell her you love her, and you want to meet her in your garden."

"And then?"

She handed me the gun.

"Under the moon?" I asked.

"Naturally," said Jeanne. "Then come back here and we'll watch it on the news. I'm calling the police, saying she's threatened to kill you. That way it's self-defence."

She smiled and touched my shoulder.

So I rang Laura and told her I loved her, and she put on her aerobic stuff and she came round and we kissed in our front garden under the moon that I guess wasn't the real one, if Jeanne wanted us under it.

I heard the sirens in the distance, and two helicopters, one from East and one from West, converging. Media maybe. Or Police. Not that the difference is that real any more.

Then I pulled out the gun and counted the bullets, while Laura smiled too brightly.

And then I made my decision.

See, there were six bullets.

The way I saw it, that was enough to take out at least the first lot of police to arrive.

A lucky shot at a helicopter might bring that down too. With the time that bought me we could retreat to the house, and my father's arsenal.

Then we'd start a siege, while my Dad mobilized his fan-base, most of whom were heavy-assault nuts anyway, and if we retreated inside and set up a sniper positions then -

– and then I looked up at the moon. Like of any of it was going to happen –

– and I pulled the trigger on Laura's too-bright smile, and forced the gun into the fingers of her corpse. O'Shea came running up at the sound of the shot, and I squeezed Laura's fingers. O'Shea dropped dead.

I glanced up then at movement in my periphery. Through the trees was the Harper house, and I saw Mrs Harper at the window, watching.

I went next door, as Mrs Harper came out to give her story to the gathering media. Jeanne and I watched her on the news.

She looked taller on the TV casts, the senior Plan Man executive who had seen everything as an eyewitness: the deranged teenage girl who had shot O'Shea – cut to O'Shea, blood seeping out from under the police blanket – the hero boy, son of his holostar father, who had struggled with her, the inevitable accidental shooting as they grappled for the gun.

Cue Mrs Harper on the tragedy of violence, the importance of regulating material that youngsters are exposed to. Cue the revelation that Laura's family had shown unapproved films about young people and sex and violence, like *Romeo and Juliet*, to their teenaged daughter. The terrible waste of a young life, cut short. And now a word from our sponsors.

Later, the cameras tracked my ashen-faced father out of his MicroFox limo and into my arms, and that was the shot all the bulletins closed with. There were no pictures of him leaving a shocked Tienka from their city love-nest for the urgent family emergency, but he told the media that was where he had been.

"Go to the city," he whispered, as we hugged. "Change your name and find another nice Indie girl and have an ordinary life. Don't let PM ruin you more than they have done already. Okay?"

I was 18. Like I was going to listen to my old man. Like I was going to listen to anyone. The way I saw it, no one knows how anything's going to turn out.

Not my Dad, not me, not Mrs Harper, not the drone that wrote the code that captured Jeanne's poolside full-frontal.

Plan Man? Okay, maybe they think they know how it's going to work out. I mean, they gave my Dad a raise and with all the extra exposure on the news he went to number four in the rankings. Hell, Plan Man even gave me a contract. I'm currently in at eleven on the motion-capture rankings. Highest ever debut for a rookie.

And Jeanne?

Well, yeah, she thinks she knows how it's going to play out, too.

We were by her pool, and she was talking about the dynasty that will result from her pregnancy. "Now you're a star we'll be the perfect marriage of content-provision and content," she said. "That's the way forward. That's the next big thing. Ditch the PM material crap, ditch the motion capture."

"Right, sure." I laughed. "Like Plan Man are going to go with that. A formula that's worked on a thousand

planets, they're just going to –"

"Plan Man can be beaten."

She watched as my smiled died.

"Jeanne, you're *serious*?"

"Remember by the pool, that first time? You said you were in? Whatever?"

I nodded.

"Well, this is the in. Like I said, I've got moves you've never seen."

"But even your genes are Plan Man."

"She's ex-head of cable. That should tell you something."

"So what's she do now?"

"Restructuring, she calls it."

"And what's the strategy?"

"When you and your Dad hit number one and two in the globals, then we defect. Go Indie. Wake up the world. That's the plan."

I thought about that for a while. Jeanne was sunbathing naked, as ever.

"Should we really be talking like this? With, you know..." I nodded at the moon.

"I lied. The images are terrible. They can't read lips. They can barely get number plates. They just pretend they can see our every word and deed, and all the human race cowers like sheep."

"But the downloads –"

"I've got web cams, everywhere. That's how we're gonna fund this."

"You're planning to retake the planet through web sex and cinema?"

"Yup."

"But then... then Laura was on *our* side."

"It's not what side someone's on, it's what they do. She was amateur. And you needed the exposure."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. Well, prayer and sorrow all that." She put out her cigarette. "So you going to save the human race, or what?"

I watched the pool. "Will it work?"

She shrugged. "People like sex," she said. "People don't like Planet Management. It's worth a try."

I looked at her for a long time.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I'm thinking how to make this whole story play more noble, when we make the movie of our lives. If we retake the planet."

"Oh, you know, just stick some orchestra on top," she said. "That'll work. Used to in the old days."

And then she stretched like a cat, and smiled, and touched my shoulder, and we made love under the moon.

For a second or two I wondered about the moon, about whether it was a bad one or not. And then I stopped wondering about anything but firesongs.

Daniel Kaysen lives in Brighton. He has previously worked on the boundary of fiction and non-fiction: writing speculative journalism (under a pseudonym) and editing train timetables. The above is his first pure fiction sale.



# A Perfect Setting

John Nixon

In *Low-Flying Aircraft* (*Aparelho voador a baixa altitude*) we have something special – a Portuguese-language feature film, by a Swedish director (Solveig Nordlund), based on a story by English writer J. G. Ballard. It received its world premier public showing during the Gothenburg Film Festival in February 2002.

Neither of the two previous major feature films of Ballard stories have really been *sf*. *Empire of the Sun* is biographical-historical drama, *Crash* – novel and film – has always seemed to me more about sexual obsession and perverted tenderness in a coldly technological present. Brilliant, but mainstream. On another level, both *Empire* and *Crash* are big films with big budgets. By contrast, “*Low-Flying Aircraft*,” the story, is Ballardian *sf* all through: an indeterminate near-future, a world undergoing disaster, the familiar made strange and surreal, shifting like the sands of the beaches surrounding the abandoned tourist resort where the story is played out. As for the film, *Low-Flying Aircraft* is – relatively – low-budget and low-key, the story pared down to its essentials, but still true to Ballard and, to my taste, a tad more immediate than *Empire* and a deal more human than *Crash*.

Another interesting contrast is that *Low-Flying Aircraft* has a distinctly female perspective. For all the praise and criticism showered on Ballard during his long and productive career, one thing I don't believe he has ever been accused of is feminism. Rarely, if ever, are any of his protagonists female and his style can sometimes seem rem-

iniscent of stories for boys from the 1950s. Both the films *Empire* and *Crash*, in different ways followed this reading of their original stories. But in *Low-Flying Aircraft*, unlike the story on which it is based, the central protagonist is Judite, and the focus of the film remains on her throughout.

In a not too distant future, the human race is dying, the population of the world, of Europe specifically, is

ageing, shrinking. The smaller European countries are closing down, their remaining inhabitants moving to the few centres of population left, concentrated around the cores of the once great cities. A political system with fascist overtones seeks rigorously to control genetic purity. The problem is that pregnant women are no longer giving birth to human babies but to “Zotes,” mutants so different from humans as to constitute a different

species. Everywhere posters show fat, laughing babies with the slogan “THIS IS US” – in doctors’ surgeries, other posters depict foetus-like creatures with blind eye-sockets and over-large heads identified as “Z.O.T.E.”

All pregnant mothers are subjected to tests, and only approved pregnancies are countenanced – but few, if any, achieve approval. For all women identified as carrying a Zote, abortion is the only option. How long has this been going on? Long enough for the world to have become empty, for the territory outside the cities to have become a wasteland of abandoned structures and empty roads inhabited only by small groups of ageing “tourists,” social drop-outs, and, perhaps, Zotes. But what are the Zotes really, and where do they come from? Can it be that the genetic tests are themselves the cause of the mutations?

This is what Judite (played with conviction and intensity by Margarida Marinho) has convinced herself. Expecting her seventh child after six consecutive terminations, she desperately persuades her husband, André (Miguel Guilherme), to connive with her in avoiding the tests. André, a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Food, arranges for



forged documents, and together they flee to an all-but-deserted seaside resort, beyond the reach of the police. Here they enlist the help of the idiosyncratic Dr Gould (Rui Morrison). Gould's hobby appears to be flying his small biplane low across the landscape and spraying it with trails of luminescent paint.

The hotel where they stay while Judite's pregnancy comes to term is partly occupied by a handful of elderly tourists (the comic relief), and the hotel manager and his wife. Most of the hotel, and indeed most of the resort, has been abandoned. There are vistas of empty corridors and stairwells littered with broken glass and other detritus, abandoned plazas and streets filled with the sun and the wind but little else. By the sea, car bodies lie half buried in the sand and the facades of resort buildings, obviously quite modern, are decaying, with popped window frames and buckled doors. Even in the inhabited portions of the hotel, power failures are a recurring event and water likely to be cut off just when it is needed.

There is one other resident, the mysterious and beautiful adolescent Carmen (Rita S6). Gradually Judite and André come to realize that Carmen is both a Zote and Gould's daughter. Although dumb and virtually blind, she communicates and navigates by touch, scent and sound, and marks her route with symbols of her own devising, painted in the same luminous paint – the only thing she can see – with which her father sprays the landscape. It is Carmen, eventually, who helps Judite give birth, and to whom Judite entrusts her child, who is, of course, also a Zote.

**T**he success of the film depends on two factors, the casting and acting, especially of the four principals, and the perfect setting. The film was made almost entirely on location in Troia, a resort on the Portuguese coast, a speculator's white elephant, begun in the heady mid-1970s after the Portuguese Revolution, never completed, and partly abandoned.

The director and co-writer of *Low-Flying Aircraft*, Solveig Nordlund (who braved the winter weather to be present at the world premier and answer questions from the audience), is probably best known internationally for her award-winning magical-realist film about street children in Mozambique, *Comédia Infantil* (1998), but has an extensive history as a producer, director and writer of plays, short films and documentaries. She is a long-time admirer of Ballard. In 1986 she filmed his early story "Thirteen to Centaurus" (as *Journey to Orion*) and made a documentary portrait of him for Swedish

television: *Future Now*. Both were screened at a festival in Troia, and that was when she first became aware of the resort and its potential as a backdrop for a Ballard film.

For ten or twelve years the project struggled on in different forms. Nordlund's ambition was to do justice to Ballard by producing the film in English with an English-speaking cast, but as a relative unknown – internationally speaking – getting the financing for a such a major project proved difficult. Finally, the news that Troia was scheduled for redevelopment brought her to the realization that the film had to be made now or never. The English script (a version of which Ballard had read and approved) was recast in Portuguese and enough money was found for a scaled-down, low-budget production. Filming went ahead.

All things considered, *Low-Flying Aircraft* is a very satisfactory achievement. Apart from the scenery, the necessary concentration on the acting rather than a song-studded soundtrack or expensive special effects is only to the good. (Not to denigrate Johan Zachrisson's specially composed music, nor to imply that there are no special effects – the ultrasound scan of Judite's foetus is quite disturbing, the more so when you learn how little has actually been added to a real scan.) Margarida Marinho is especially compelling in the way she conveys Judite's psychological turmoil as the pregnancy progresses and she is torn between hope that her baby is "one of us" and fear that an alien thing is attacking her from inside her womb. (I found the near-to-drowning sequence in the hotel pool especially effective, others – especially women – in the audience reacted to the dreams of bleeding.)

Nordlund's interpretation of the story is to see Judite and André as typical of any couple about to become parents. "They balance between hope, doubt, fear for what will happen to the child in the future..." In the context of the empty, apparently dying world in which they live, their choice to give birth to a child "becomes a gesture of courage and revolt. My intention is to show that having a child is an adventure at any time and that life is a miracle in whatever form."

*Low-Flying Aircraft* will be shown in Portugal and broadcast on Portuguese-language television around the world. Whether it gets screened in Britain or other parts of the English-speaking world is rather more uncertain. Solveig Nordlund is more hopeful for a general release in France. In the meantime, the film will be making a circuit of different film festivals, most immediately at the Brussels Festival of Fantasy and SF Film in April 2002.

**John Nixon**

# The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction

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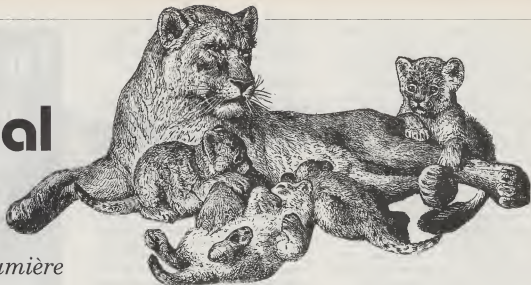
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# Bestial Acts

*Claude Lalumière*



## Aydee

Now, most of the time, Aydee has no reason to think of the man and the woman. Occasionally, she spots someone walking down the street who for some reason or other – a piece of clothing, a hairstyle, a frown – sparks an unpleasant memory. These are not unwelcome incidents. They remind her that the man and the woman are nothing but a memory to her, that she has succeeded in stepping into another life.

Aydee: that was her secret name, the one she'd given herself. No one knew of it, especially not the man and the woman he'd given her that other name when she was born.

For the first ten years of her life, Aydee lived in a tiny one-bedroom apartment with that man and that woman. The man made good money. He had a job that required him to wear a suit and tie – he sold something or other, stocks, buildings, insurance, whatever. He shaved every morning, except for the moustache that was much too big for his small face.

Most of the money from the man's job went into business suits and into cocaine. The man and the woman rarely slept, rarely ate, and rarely thought of food at all. Occasionally, the man or the woman would order pizza or bring home TV dinners. Aydee cherished those impromptu meals.

The woman had the habit of letting coins accumulate at the bottom of the cutlery drawer. Aydee would pilfer it in order to buy lunch at school. Aydee didn't know if the woman noticed that Aydee took that money. Aydee was always careful to leave enough change in the drawer, so that it would look undisturbed. Still, she sometimes had enough left over to buy a snack on the way to school.

Most weekends, the woman would take Aydee on the bus to see the woman's mother. Aydee and the woman rarely exchanged even a word during these bus rides. Aydee passed the time reading off the street signs, like a countdown to armageddon.

Fat and mean-mouthed, the woman's mother chain-smoked so carelessly that she always had at least two cigarettes going. Every time they visited, the old crone

would spew hatred from the moment they stepped in the door to when they left. Immigrants, neighbours, family... she never ran out of hot spite. While the woman's mother was ranting at her daughter about this and that, she would be serving Aydee platefuls of food: tomato-lettuce sandwiches, homemade cookies and doughnuts, fried eggs and bacon, chicken noodle soup, fruit salad, peanut butter sandwiches, hot chicken sandwiches with gravy, meat pie, apple pie, and so on and so on. There was cigarette ash in every mouthful. Still, Aydee ate. The old woman, chiding her daughter for Aydee's thinness, would always insist that they take some food back with them – but that invariably angered the younger woman, who screamed back that she knew how to take care of the girl. It was an argument that the old woman always lost. Aydee knew the old woman didn't really care about her. All she really wanted was to dominate her daughter. Aydee was just the most convenient weapon. Every visit resulted in the same fight.

On weekdays, while the man was away at his job, the woman would spend the whole day cleaning, working herself into white-hot rages at the dust and grime that constantly undermined her efforts at spotless cleanliness. She shouted at the dirt in the corners; she screamed at the smudges on the floors; she hissed at the mildew on the bathroom tiles. She could not abide the slightest smear or dust. The apartment reeked of disinfectant. The woman fuelled her fastidious campaigns with a constant stream of cocaine and jumbo bottles of cola.

Aydee had taught herself to be meticulously clean and tidy. Thus, for better and for worse, Aydee was ignored, invisible.

On her tenth birthday, like most nights, the man and the woman were sitting on the living-room couch, watching television with the sound on loud. The one bedroom in that apartment was the bedroom of the man and the woman: a strictly forbidden zone. Aydee was allowed to sleep on the couch, but, often, she was forced to seek refuge in the bathroom. She would take off her shoes and lie down in the tub, inhaling the fumes of the various cleaning products the woman used to keep it sparkling white. That night, though, she just stood in the living

room, between the couch and the door, watching the man and the woman. Waiting. Waiting for nothing.

The man was drinking beer; the woman, cola. It was past midnight; the bowl of cocaine on the coffee table was half full. They would still be up for hours, Aydee knew. They might even stay up all night. She was hungry and tired. In the fridge, scrubbed to an immaculate white inside and out, there were only big plastics bottles of cola and cans of beer. She had tried to drink these before, but the beer smelled like piss, and the soft drink felt like exploding sludge when it was going down her throat.

Her heart was a tight mess of knots, a heavy weight in her chest. She didn't cry. She never cried.

She was hungry. She was tired. Enough; she'd had enough. There was nothing for her here.

She was ten years old, now. She didn't need to sneak out.

## Lucas

Once, I was a ten-year-old boy. Father. Mother. No pets.

Imagine that, huh? No pets. Now, I can't go anywhere without at least one of my dogs. Feels wrong, y'know? I begged again and again to get a dog or a cat. But my folks were firm on this one. Mom hated animals. She was scared. Why the hell are people so stupid?

Anyway.

When I was a boy, the best thing my folks ever did for me was leave me alone. On days when there was no school – the whole summer in fact – I'd wander around the city, and sometimes even a bit beyond. Walking. Riding my bike. Taking the bus. Getting on the subway.

I guess I must've been eight or so when this wandering thing started to take on serious proportions. But that's just a guess. I don't remember starting to do it. It's not like one day I got up and said to myself: "Lucas, today you will start to explore the world!" But, then again...

Hell, who knows what I was thinking? There's no clear before and after. It's not, y'know, like one day Mom started walling about how different I'd suddenly become. Nope, I was just the same kind of different I'd always been. I remember, when I was three or four, my mom, crying her eyes out, pleading with me to act normal, to stop embarrassing her by saying weird things no one understood.

I have no idea what I could have said or done to cause her so much distress. Was I really that different from the other kids? Anyway.

It probably took her and my dad a bit over a year to begin to suspect just how far I was roaming.

They made a big fuss at first. They yelled at me, something they rarely did. They made some sort of half-hearted attempt to restrict my comings and goings. For a few weeks they diligently watched over me. They demanded a strict accounting of my time. I was furious for a couple of days, mainly at the realization that they could exert such authority over me. I figured they couldn't keep that up for very long. I was right. It was clearly more taxing for them than for me.

So, anyway, where was I?

Oh yeah, I remember.

So around that time, I turned ten.

At the time, I didn't know anything about books.

Can you believe there wasn't even one book in the whole house? Imagine that, huh?

Looking at me now, you'd think I'd dropped from my mother's womb right onto a messy pile of old, lurid paperbacks and ancient, arcane leather-bound tomes. Nope. No such scenario.

The only books I remember from elementary school are textbooks (y'know, math, English, that stuff), dictionaries and, one year – in fourth grade – for some reason, there was an incomplete set of an old, battered, mangled encyclopedia on top of an old filing cabinet in the back of the classroom.

I know, there must've been a school library, there must have been, but I'll be damned if I can remember it. Anyway. Where – oh yeah. The encyclopedia.

## Aydee

Aydee was cold. She was feeling faint, hunger and exhaustion getting the better of her. She didn't ask or beg anyone for assistance, food or money. Nothing in her short life had led her to expect help from anyone or allowed her the luxury of trusting that anyone would care about her needs, much less attend to them.

She walked through the streets of the city. There were well-dressed men and women stepping in and out of cars. Brash young folk, not so well dressed, hurried to go from here to there, or nowhere to nowhere, huddled in groups, hooting and shouting. In the doorways of businesses that were closed at this time of night, she noticed people wrapped in tattered blankets. Some talked to the passers-by who ignored them, others faded into the shadows. Some were very old, older even than the woman's old mother. Some were younger than Aydee.

No one noticed her.

It was getting harder and harder for her to keep her eyes open. Her legs rebelled against her aimless wandering, urging her to stop and rest.

Aydee ducked into an alley, where the intrusive glare of the city lights was diminished. Her back against a wall, she slowly let herself drop to the ground and shut her eyes.

In very little time, she was able to ignore the city's noises, letting her body slip into the drowsiness that precedes sleep. Then, another sound reached her ears. Purring. It grew louder and louder until it seemed to occupy all the space in her head. The more she listened the more complex the purring grew, like layers of sound rippling into each other. Automatically, her mind tried – but failed – to find meaning and order amidst the chaotic noise.

Aydee could not ignore the sound. It nagged at her.

The purring came from deeper in the alley. Reluctantly, she propped herself up and walked, slowly, towards the source of the sound. She was so hungry. Every step intensified the pain in her gut. Her eyes adjusted to the dimness of her surroundings. All around her, between the two walls that defined the alley, were layers upon layers of rotting garbage: disintegrating bags spilling their con-



tents on the ground, metal cans overflowing, large containers dripping foul liquids. Aydee could see no scavengers, but there were waves of movement beneath the surface of the strewn refuse. Aydee hurried towards the sound.

Walking became a trance state. The purring subsumed all other sensory input.

Aydee was yanked out of her daze by strong animal smells. The noxious smells of garbage were gone, as was the trash itself. She had walked a much longer distance than the alley could possibly be. Hadn't she? Where was she? A short distance in front of her, she found the source of the purring.

A gigantic lioness, almost as big as a whole room, was lying on the ground, blocking any possible progress down the path the girl had been following. As Aydee approached the beast, she noticed that all kinds of cubs, pups, and kittens were huddled against to the giant's body, playfully intertwined, many of them feeding, blissfully sucking on the creature's teats. Others were climbing, sliding or sleeping on her gargantuan frame. Aydee felt the hard knots around her heart not untangling themselves but, at least, relaxing some of their relentless pressure.

Slowly, the giant creature turned her head towards Aydee. The lioness's gaze penetrated the darkness and found its way deep into Aydee. Once more, Aydee felt the knots around her heart loosen. This time they loosened enough that powerful sobs erupted from a long-neglected part of herself. Tears gushed from her eyes as she wailed from the onslaught of waves of accumulated pain and sorrow.

Aydee staggered towards the lioness and nestled amongst the varied assortment of young animals. Her mouth latched onto a free teat. She sucked hungrily and was nourished in the many ways she unknowingly needed and craved.

Aydee fell asleep, enveloped by bestial odours and comforting warmth, her mouth fastened on a nipple.

## Lucas

I spent as much time as I could leafing through the pages of that encyclopedia. I hurried to finish the class assignments so I could have an excuse to go to the back of the class and lose myself in its pages. The teacher was more than happy to see one of her flock eager to spend time reading.

I used to grab a volume at random and let the pages fall. When the pages had settled, I'd look at the open spread... the bold headings, the black-and-white photos, the colour drawings... Inevitably, some item would grab my attention. Usually, though not always, I'd be seduced by the artwork accompanying the entries describing mythical beasts. Every entry had at least one cross-reference: an epoch, a country, a civilization, an author... I'd hunt down the cross-references, trying to place the pieces of these interlocking puzzles together. I still remember the intense frustration I felt every time I failed to find a cross-reference because it wasn't contained in the surviving volumes. A lot of pages were missing, too. Ripped

out! Damn! That really made me fume. Even more than the fact that the set was incomplete, that two volumes were missing!

So. I made no distinction between history and mythology; both belonged to the great tapestry of time and tales that I gobbled up like a starving dog presented with a giant dish of fresh meat. I mean, I really made no distinction. Troy and Gilgamesh, for example, cross-referenced to both historical and mythological entries. Bored and restless and wanting to believe anything that would stimulate me, I was more than happy to accept that these often contradictory readings of the past were all equally true, that reality was not flat and linear, but complex and multidimensional, allowing for many versions of the same events to exist simultaneously.

Anyway. I quickly learned to keep all this stuff to myself. Especially considering that, as I came to learn, many of the entries were about things that weren't mentioned anywhere else. Things, it seemed, no one had ever heard about. Like the dark Yamesh-Lot and the exploits of the Shippan-Shap and the mysteries of the Green Blue and Brown God.

One evening at dinner, I can't remember why, I started to talk about my theories on history and myth. I imagine that somehow something somebody had said triggered a connection for me. No. No. More likely, I was just eager to blurt out these new ideas. I found that stuff so exciting.

Before I'd gone very far in my monologue, my parents started interrogating me, angrily, almost viciously, about the origins of these ideas. Where did I find out about these things? Who was putting this nonsense into my head? Who? Who? Who was I spending my time with? Who was telling me these things? Who! Why! Where! How! Why couldn't I be like other kids? Tell us! Tell us! Tell us who's putting all these ideas into your head! Tell us who's making you crazy!

I knew better than to talk about the encyclopedia. I knew – I just knew – they'd arrange to have me banned from reading it. I screamed that they were my own ideas (they were – but my sadly unimaginative parents could never believe or understand that); I bolted out of the kitchen and locked myself in my bedroom. I was so angry.

Anyway, I still spent as much time as I could devouring the encyclopedia. It was no longer with the mad rush of a new passion, but with pleasant familiarity. I paid a different kind of attention to the volumes. I examined them not only for their content, but also as objects. I studied the wrinkled spines and scratched covers, ran my fingers over the subtly embossed letters forming the words of the title (*The Clarence & Charles Old World Encyclopedia*) and the name of the publishing company (Kurtzberg, Vaughn & Jones, Publishers). I carefully studied all the letters, digits, and symbols on the copy-right page.

Around that time, I was exploring the downtown core more and more. It had never occurred to me before that were such things as bookshops. I was so excited when I discovered that there were dozens of them in the city. I was sure, now, that I'd finally lay my hands on those



missing volumes of *The Clarence & Charles Old World Encyclopaedia*.

I scoured all the bookshops. I had no money to purchase the books, but I didn't let that interfere with my quest. I'd deal with that, somehow. But...

I couldn't find them. Frustrated, I started to ask. No luck. Mostly, I was curtly dismissed, my query not taken at all seriously. A few times, though, some shopkeeper or clerk would take pity on me and actually look through thick, massive volumes for the title, and, failing in that endeavour, for the publisher whose name I had carefully memorized. But I made a pest of myself. I kept insisting, even to the ones who were nice to me, that their references were wrong or inaccurate.

There was no trace of the *Clarence & Charles* anywhere. No one had ever heard of it. No reference book even listed its publisher. But I knew the encyclopedia existed. I knew. Every school day, I lost myself in its pages.

It took me a few months to think of hitting the libraries. I thought my experience with bookshops had been frustrating. Ah! That was nothing compared to the humiliation and frustration that awaited me in the city's public libraries.

In those days, libraries – all those I went to – were segregated into “adult” and “children’s” sections – in separate rooms. Everywhere, the adult section was open to anyone 12 or older, but anyone younger was relegated to the dull purgatory of the children's section, denied access to the adult area. No amount of sneaking, lying or pleading succeeded in gaining me entry into the adult stacks or, even, to convince the strict, unimaginative librarians to find out for me if *The Clarence & Charles Old World Encyclopaedia* was to be found in the forbidden stacks.

I got thrown out of every library in town, narrowly escaping, once, being detained and having my parents called. I never set foot in a library again. I can't stand the damn things.

When the school year gave way to summer, it meant that I no longer had access to the *Clarence & Charles*. Ouch. But I'd found something else. I was spending a lot of time in an understaffed, overstuffed five-level bookstore. I didn't find the encyclopedia there either, but I spent whole days sitting on the dirty floor of that huge maze, reading, with no one pestering me. It was so filthy there. The books were in terrible shape. Pages torn out. Covers missing. Smelly, gunky stains on the pages. But I'd never seen so many books in one place!

On the fourth floor there was, in a dimly lit corner, a row of books barely off the floor that captured my imagination almost as much as the *Clarence & Charles*. They were all from the same publisher, Unknown Knowledge Press, and the presentation from volume to volume differed only slightly. They were all paperbacks and all the covers had a wine-red background with crude line art, featuring pyramids, flying saucers, fabulous creatures, eyes in the sky, and all the usual paraphernalia of esoteric beliefs. The series had a name which was boldly plastered on each cover, in larger type than any of the individual titles or authors: *Strange World*.

Unknown Knowledge Press! What a ridiculous name!

But, back then, just the right thing to get my attention. These books presented conflicting, contradictory theories concerning the secret history of the world. Perfect fodder for me. Remember, I believed in a fluid past where all possibilities were just as likely, just as true. Although I never came across a book in that series that promoted my theory, it seemed to be the only way to reconcile all the divergent histories and beliefs found in those pages. And I believed everything I read. It was all too fantastic not to be true.

I loved those books so much, you know. I spent entire days reading and rereading every page of every volume I could get my hands on. But they weren't what I was after, not quite.

## Aydee

Aydee was awakened by a feather falling on her face. It cut her cheek, just slightly, but enough to make her wince. It was a long feather, almost as long as her arm. It was sharp. Picking it up, she nicked one of her fingers; after that, she was more careful handling it. Its colour was a shifting shade of green, blue, and brown. Aydee had never seen such an elusive colour. She wiped the thin wound on her cheek and tasted her blood.

The smell of rotting garbage reminded her of the previous night, of her journey through the alley. She looked around her and discovered that she wasn't really in an alley. The night before, the shadows had misled her, and she'd ducked into a crevice between buildings that was barely any deeper than it was wide. So, she thought, she'd only dreamed of the lioness. And yet... She wasn't at all hungry. She pushed herself up from her bed of garbage bags.

Still holding the feather, she walked out onto the sidewalk. It was morning rush hour. The streets were filled with people and cars. What were those frenzied shadows moving across everything?

She looked up in the sky: a winged skeleton (later, she would learn that it was male) was brandishing a flaming sword against a mass of darkness. The skeleton hung in mid-air, his thick wings, the same ethereal colour as the feather in her hand, beating rapidly. The darkness had no fixed shape. It erupted from the ground, blossoming in many directions, sprouting tendrils and limbs of various shapes, all directed towards the winged creature, sometimes succeeding, briefly, in wrapping itself around one of the skeleton's limbs. The winged warrior fought back ferociously, wielding his sword at lightning speed, hacking away at his attacker. It was the most exciting thing Aydee had ever seen.

Briefly, Aydee tore her eyes away from the conflict. Why wasn't anyone reacting to this? Everyone on the street seemed oblivious to the duel raging above their heads and to the shadows that fell and moved across their paths.

Darkness fell across her face. She looked up again to see one of the dark mass's tendrils shooting straight at her. She felt a rush of wind as the skeleton flew down next to her, chopping off the black tentacle before it could touch her. It was then that she noticed the leather

satchel hanging from his shoulder across his chest, his free arm clutching it protectively.

The darkness shaped itself into a funnel and attacked, trying to wrap itself around the skeleton's head. The winged creature's flaming sword cut through the oozing mass, chopping off the funnel and a sizable portion of the darkness itself.

The skeleton took advantage of the momentary respite of the darkness's assault and dove, his sword a fiery spearhead, straight into the heart of his malleable foe. A thick column sprang out of the darkness and swatted the winged skeleton. The swordfighter temporarily lost his balance. More tendrils and funnels frantically shot out of the dark mass, but they were immediately cut down by the skeleton's sword.

The winged warrior was now nearly at ground level, his sword slashing through the enfolding darkness, slicing ever closer to the spot from which the darkness seemed to be emanating, hacking away at the oozing mass with increasing speed and ferocity. Finally, the darkness succeeded in wrapping a funnel around the skeleton's head. It savagely twisted its opponent's neck, shaking the winged creature's whole body. It wrapped its tendrils around his legs and wings. The entrapped warrior fought blindly, desperately, his sword cutting through all the darkness in its path.

The darkness was sprouting tentacles with increasing urgency, but the warrior was standing at the heart of the dark mass. Holding his sword with both hands, he plunged his weapon into the source of the mass.

There erupted such a loud, screeching wail that Aydee was knocked off her feet. By the time she regained her bearings, it was over. All she saw was the winged skeleton lying on the ground, partly propped against a lamp post, his flaming sword nowhere in sight. Of the darkness, there was no sign.

She ran to the skeleton. She stood over him and examined him closely. Around her, passers-by were studiously ignoring her, blind to the fabulous sight that held her attention.

The warrior's body was badly splintered. His wings had lost much of their splendour. They were now ragged and sparse, their colour fading. She looked at the feather in her hand. Its colour, too, was fading.

Overcome with compassion, Aydee reached down to touch the fallen warrior. She needed to help. She wanted to ensure his well-being.

She whispered: "What can I do? What?"

Slowly, the skeleton's eyeless face turned towards her. His empty gaze fell on the young girl's worried face. The warrior opened his mouth, but the only sound that escaped was a slow, quiet hiss.

## Lucas

You see, I was grateful for the fact that no one seemed to notice me in that bookshop. It had somehow, in my mind, become an extension of my room. It was a private place where reality didn't intrude.

I was scared when someone eventually spoke to me. It was one of the clerks. He was wearing the ugly brown and

yellow staff uniform. Adult alert! But, really, he was only 17 or 18. Twenty at most. Adult enough for me back then, I guess.

"You love those books, huh? I've been noticing you for a few weeks now."

I must've looked like he was pointing a gun to my head. I know that's how I felt.

He chuckled, "Hey, don't worry, kid. You can read all you want. No one cares here. The bosses never come into the store, no one's gonna bother you."

He stretched out his hand. "I'm Alan."

I managed to bring myself to shake his hand. I immediately felt much better. He shook my hand firmly, making me feel like a real person.

I gave him my name, and we started chatting. It didn't take long for the conversation to become one-sided. I was starved for attention and here was someone willing to listen to all my outlandish ideas without laughing at me.

I must've paused for breath or something 'cause Alan managed to say something again. "Hey, listen, Lucas, have you ever heard of Lost Pages?"

I said I hadn't, because, well, I hadn't. Not yet. He whipped out a bookmark. "Here. I've never heard about this encyclopedia you're looking for, but if any store can find it for you it's this one. You should go sometime. Really." This was a familiar scene for me. Booksellers were always trying to fob me off on one another, hoping to get rid of me.

In the same breath he quickly added: "Hey, I gotta get back to work. See ya, Lucas. Okay?"

I could see in his face that I'd kinda freaked him out. I was much more than he'd bargained for. He was too nice a guy to be anything but polite, but, even back then, as socially inept as I was, I could tell he was relieved to be rid of me.

The next time I saw Alan, our positions were kinda reversed. He's a good friend. Has been for a while.

## Aydee

The winged skeleton raised his arm and, trembling, clumsily wrapped his fingers around Aydee's wrist. Despite his wounds, he had a strong grip. The fallen warrior brought Aydee's hand to rest on the satchel he carried.

Then, the skeleton's hand clattered against the ground. Aydee put the feather across his outstretched fingers.

She flipped open the satchel and found inside a thick leather-bound volume. She took out the heavy book. There were strange characters embossed on its cover and spine. For all she knew they could have been the letters of a foreign language, like Arabic or Japanese, but she suspected their origin was less mundane.

Aydee looked through the book, hoping, but doubting, that it might point to a course of action. Was the skeleton dying? How could she help?

Inside, the book was filled with the same sort of symbols as on its cover. It was no help, she couldn't understand anything. But then she found a bookmark tucked between the endpapers and the front cover. Printed in English, it read "Lost Pages" – with a street address and phone number.

She knew the name of that street. She remembered sitting in the bus with the woman, on the way to the old crone's house, reading street signs through the window. She could recite the name of all those streets, in order. Getting there would be easy.

She was reluctant to leave the skeleton unguarded, but, she reasoned, no one else could see him, and if the darkness – or some other threat – returned, what could she possibly do against it?

## Lucas

As it turned out, I didn't even have to ask for *The Clarence & Charles Old World Encyclopaedia*. It was right there on the shelves of Lost Pages.

The tables, shelves, and counters were packed with books that I had never seen anywhere before. Illustrated bestiaries in languages at whose origins I couldn't begin to guess. Histories of places about which I had never heard. Theological essays on mysterious religions with equally mysterious names... Well, you know the kind of stuff.

And the dogs... there were dogs all over the place. Big and fat. Little and furry. Cuddly and goofy. Slobbering, with their tongues hanging down to the floor. Sleeping, with their paws stretched up into the air.

I'd just stepped into Nirvana.

I sat down on the floor, hidden (or so I thought) from the old man at the desk. I flipped open a volume of the *Clarence & Charles* that I'd never seen before, and, instead of frantically flipping back and forth, incessantly checking cross-references, as I usually did when I read that encyclopedia, I started reading on the first page. A brown Lab mutt trotted over to me, sniffed my nose, and put her head in my lap.

Yep. Nirvana, all right.

## Aydee

Her quest to help the fallen warrior, to find Lost Pages, filled Aydee with a sense of purpose. Never in her life had she felt moved to do or accomplish anything. She'd existed from day to day. Waiting. Waiting for nothing, because nothing ever changed.

She would find the shop. She would help the warrior. She had to. For the first time in her life she felt needed. She could not ignore that.

She ran towards Lost Pages, hugging the big, heavy book to her chest.

## Lucas

I completely lost track of time. I was harrumphed out of my reverie by the old man who, standing at the front desk, had been sorting through a pile of books when I'd come into the shop. He was round-faced, with a big nose and mischievous smile and a thick, grey beard. He was wearing the trademark "old bookseller" cardigan.

He was holding a stool in his hands. He put it down close to me and sat down. Several of the dogs came to see what was going on. All of a sudden a bunch of them were sniffing and licking my face.

The old man clapped his hands and the dogs stopped. "I'm afraid we're closing up. You've been reading that

book all day."

Uh-oh. This time I was really caught, I thought. There was no way I could pay for this book. He was just gonna throw me out. I wouldn't get away with this again, I was sure. So close. I was so close. I was holding it in my hands!

He laughed. "Don't worry. I'll put the book aside for you. You can come back tomorrow and read some more."

I was halfway back to my parents' house when I realized that I hadn't said a word to him. I'd just handed him back the book and bolted out. I just ran. Ran all the way to my parent's house and into my bedroom and shut the door.

## Aydee

The shopkeeper looked anxious. He listened carefully to the young girl, all the while petting a large, goofy-looking St Bernard mutt. The shopkeeper's other hand was resting on the skeleton's book, which Aydee had brought with her.

"You're very brave. And smart. You did the right thing. I'll close up, and we'll go right away." He shoofed out the few browsers who were loitering in the cramped shop and locked the door. "Wait for me here. I have to get something in the back." When the man walked away, the St Bernard mutt came up to Aydee and licked her fingers.

The shopkeeper came back holding an oversize child's wagon. "We'll use this to carry him back here."

The St Bernard and two other dogs followed them out. The shopkeeper asked the others – the place was bustling with canines of all sizes and shapes – to stay behind. He dug into his jacket pocket and, before locking up, threw a handful of dog biscuits inside the shop.

He harnessed the vehicle to the two large dogs. The St Bernard's companion was a powerful-looking blonde Lab. A small, thin, black terrier mutt – barely larger than a cat – jumped on the wagon being pulled by the other two dogs.

Aydee led the group to where she'd left the fallen warrior. He was nowhere in sight. "He was right here. I swear he was! I swear."

"I believe you." The shopkeeper knelt by the lamp post the girl had indicated. "Look," he picked up something off the ground and showed it to Aydee. "Bone splinters... and feathers."

"But where did he go?" Aydee bent down and carefully picked up one of the sharp feathers. She wanted to keep something to remember him by.

"I don't know. Sometimes there's nothing you can do but try. You did your best."

"Is he –?"

"I don't know. I really don't. Maybe we'll never know. Maybe he'll come back to the shop tomorrow to get the book again. Maybe not."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

The shopkeeper began, "I guess I should head –" Something in the girl's eyes hit him hard, something he recognized. He wrinkled his brow and scrutinized her.

"You don't have anywhere to go, do you?"

"I – I... no." She started to sniffle. The small terrier immediately ran to her. He jumped up into her arms and

licked her face.

The man stood there for a few seconds, pondering, while the girl hid her face in the dog's fur.

"My name's Lucas." He exhaled deeply. "Y'know, I'm really hungry. Come on, let's have some lunch."

## Lucas

Not long after that, I disappeared from my parents' world.

Despite how embarrassed I was by how rudely I'd behaved with the old shopkeeper, I returned to the bookshop the very next day. I really needed to get my hands on that encyclopedia again.

Just as he'd promised, he'd kept the book for me. I apologized for the day before. He thanked me. Then, he showed me a room in the back where I could sit at a desk to read. Those volumes were big. You really needed to set them down to read.

Anyway, I started to come every day. Mister Rafael – that was the old man's name – allowed me to help him out. Running small errands, shelving, sweeping. This was the best place! It's where I wanted to spend all of my time.

At first, I found Mister Rafael's sense of humour a bit odd, a bit intimidating, but slowly I started to get it. Pretty soon, we were spending our days making weird jokes, while customers moved reverentially through the shop's stock of incunabula and esoterica.

By then, of course, I knew that the shop only occupied the storefront area of Mister Rafael's large house. I had seen enough to know that I belonged here. Here. With Mister Rafael. And the dogs! And, of course, the books. Learning about everything I'd always dreamed about and so much more I could never have imagined. Making it my life's work.

One night, after the shop closed, I told him I had something important to discuss. I basically told him my life's story. I told about how I felt. I stopped short of telling him that I'd come to see him as my father, much more so than the man whose genes I carried. Those words stuck in my throat. But he understood.

No one at home or at school knew enough about me to trace me here. And besides, I'd already begun to suspect that *Lost Pages* wasn't fully tethered to the world I'd come from.

"I was expecting something like this," Mister Rafael said.

I went back to my parents' house one last time. I packed my clothes and came to Mister Rafael's house. I came home.

He'd prepared a bedroom for me. Two walls were covered with shelves stacked with books. There was a big, old wooden desk – and a large window. It was open to let in the cool, late-summer night breeze.

Three of the dogs – Verso, Pipedream, and Unit; they're long gone now – were lying on the bed, wagging their tails. I went over to them. They climbed all over me, wrestling and playing. That –

## Aydee

"– sealed it. I've been living here ever since," Lucas nods, remembering. "Some years later, when I was old enough,

Mister Rafael retired. He went to Africa, to explore the land of his ancestors."

On the table, there was a generous spread of breads, fruit and cheeses, on which Lucas and Aydee were stuffing themselves.

"He left the shop in my care and still sends me the occasional postcard. I gather he's making some rather sensational discoveries. My life would have been pretty desolate without him."

There were large bowls of dog food and water on the floor. Aydee couldn't keep track of the number of dogs that came in and out of the kitchen to eat, drink or get their heads scratched.

She said, "Lucas... what happened today... does it... Does it happen often? Is this what your life is like?" She thought of the lioness, and of learning to trust Lucas enough to ask him if he knew about her. Soon.

"No... not often..."

He winked at the girl. She burst out giggling.

"Hey! I should get back to work. I've got boxes and boxes of books to sort through." He downed some apple juice. "Wanna help?"

She nodded. Lucas wanted her help. He needed her. Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "My name's Aydee." She felt scared and exposed, speaking that name aloud for the first time in her life.

"Well, I'm happy we met, Aydee. I really am." And when she heard Lucas say her name, she knew she'd come home.

## Coda

The giant lioness's powerful paw shatters the front door of the apartment, which opens into the living room. She walks in, destroying the doorframe, bringing down the wall.

The lioness strolls up to the couple on the couch – a small-faced man with a big moustache and a woman drinking from a jumbo-size bottle of cola – crushing everything in her path. The couple is oblivious to her presence; they look right through her, don't notice the destruction. A thundering growl erupts from deep within the creature. She raises her paw again and, in one swipe, kills both the man and the woman.

Blood and gore seep into the spotless couch, splatter against pristine surfaces, drop on the soft, clean carpet.

She sniffs at the corpses. She devours the stomachs and innards first. She strips the meat from the bones. She chomps down on the skulls and chews out the brains, the eyes, the tongues. She shatters the bigger bones with her teeth and sucks out the marrow.

Her meal finished, she leaves.

Her engorged teats cry for release.

There are many who need her.

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**Claude Lalumière** is a critic, editor and former bookseller. The above is his first published short story. He recently edited the anthology *Telling Stories: New English Fiction from Québec* (Véhicule Press, 2002). He lives in Montreal, Canada, and although French is his first language he writes in English.

# Teaching the War Robot to Dance

*Tony Ballantyne*

Joan sat alone in the empty hall, in an empty army camp in the middle of an empty winter's night. Her outdoor shoes stood neatly on the bench beside her, and not for the first time she thought of putting them back on, walking out, and demanding that the driver of the long black car take her back home. If she could find the car. If the driver would listen to her.

The smell of dust and polish and chalk was circulated by the heat of the pinking and clanking iron radiators that lined the room. At one end of the hall was a low stage, rich red curtains drawn across it decorated with some military crest; at the other end, just to one side of the double doors that led outside, a trestle table had been set with thick blue china cups and saucers beside a tea urn that merrily bubbled steam into the air. The black night sky could be seen through the high, steamy windows that were set just below the sloping roof.

Joan wondered why they were keeping her waiting. She smoothed out her cream pleated skirt, adjusted her dove-grey and cream twin set, looked down at her black patent-leather shoes with the sequins on the straps and wondered if she was overdressed. Was someone watching her, gazing down at her sitting alone in this hall, a 30-something spinster wearing lipstick and eye-shadow with no one to see it? Were they sitting now, asking themselves how a woman could have nothing else to do on a Saturday night but to sit all by herself in an empty hall?

There was a thumping noise, and the double doors at the far end of the hall were flung open. Captain Slipper entered the hall and held out his hands in apology.

"Good evening, Miss Lifeson. I'm sorry we're late. I

hope we haven't kept you waiting too long?"

"Not at all," lied Joan.

"Did you have a pleasant journey here?"

"Oh, yes."

She strained to peer around Captain Slipper to see the mysterious object that was being manoeuvred through the doorway behind him. The cold night air seeped in around the tarpaulin-covered shape on the low trolley. Four khaki-clad privates grunted and cursed as they pushed it into the centre of the hall. They were supervised by a fifth man dressed in white.

Captain Slipper shook Joan's hand and then turned to face the shape. It was taller than he was, and much wider, covered in a grey tarpaulin that fell in loose folds about its base.

"Is that it?" asked Joan.

"That's it," said Captain Slipper softly. "That's Robert."

As he spoke two of the privates took hold of the tarpaulin at one side and lifted it over the tall shape. Joan gave a little gasp at the motionless figure beneath.

It looked like a cross between a man and a gun. Its body was the dull grey sheen of a pistol. Its wide chest and shoulders narrowed to a slim waist. Its legs were like pistons, ending in a surprisingly delicate spreading of struts that planted the rubberized soles of the feet firmly on the ground. Its arms were grey cylinders, jointed with thick black rubber sheaths. Joan noted the large, delicate hands, rubber pads placed on the palms and at the tips of the fingers.

And then there was the head, such as it was. Two expressionless lenses set above a speaker grill. Joan shiv-



ered at the sight.

Captain Slipper was gazing at Robert in awe. Joan suddenly realized the mistake she had made. She didn't want to be here, she wanted to go home, right now. To turn and run into the night, to run anywhere to get away from this enormous monster and its expressionless stare. She felt her stomach begin to churn.

"Don't worry," said Captain Slipper. "He's perfectly safe. Watch this." He nodded to one of the privates. "Jones, would you?"

Jones leant across and did something behind Robert. There was a faint whirring noise and the machine gave a sudden jerk, and then another, and then it was still again. Just when Joan thought nothing else was going to happen the machine lurched and then began to find its balance. Something in the glassy grey lenses seemed to change, and Joan knew it had woken up. Captain Slipper reached out his left hand and the machine took it. Joan winced as she saw the enormous metal grab enfold the captain's thin freckled hand, but the machine's grip was incredibly delicate. She saw the rubberized pads pressing lightly on his skin and she relaxed a little.

The Captain pulled the machine towards him, and it stepped lightly from the trolley into the centre of the room. Two privates wheeled the trolley to the edge of the hall, followed by the other two dragging the tarpaulin. Captain Slipper pulled the machine closer to himself and slid his right hand around its back. The machine placed its left hand on the Captain's right shoulder. He counted under his breath and then took a step forward. Joan watched in amazement as man and machine began to waltz around the room. The machine followed the Captain's inexperienced steps perfectly. The Captain stepped forward with his right foot, leaning back awkwardly as he did so, and the machine pushed its left leg back smoothly with a faint hum, planting the large foot softly on the ground and shifting its weight to the other leg with a popping and hissing sound.

It was a strangely eerie but beautiful sight, the way the large gunmetal machine glided around the polished hall, awkwardly guided by the thin young man in the captain's uniform. The hall echoed to the gentle tapping of their feet and the creaking of the wooden floor. The privates stood by the trestle table, slurping tea from the thick china cups, and occasionally glanced at the two dancers.

Joan was transfixed by the sight. She noted the way the machine's large left hand tenderly gripped the cloth of the captain's jacket, the brown material bunching up around the rubberized finger grips. Man and machine reached the far corner of the room and disaster struck. Rather than simply steering the machine around the corner, the Captain attempted a more advanced movement: a whisk and chasse. There was a moment's confusion and then what had been a delicately balanced machine was simply a loosely connected arrangement of rods and pistons pulsing back and forth in a disorganized heap on the ground.

"Damn!" shouted the Captain, hopping backwards, favouring his left leg. The machine had caught it in the fall. "Damn, Damn, Damn," he said again. The four privates slouching by the tea urn put down their cups and

walked to the machine to right it. The Captain limped across to Joan. He was blushing.

"Sorry. That doesn't usually happen. I thought it could handle that sort of thing."

Joan shook her head. "No. It's very impressive. No, it's more than that. It's incredible. What is it?"

The Captain bent down and rubbed his leg. He was very young for a Captain, Joan noticed. Twenty-three, 24 she guessed. Nearly ten years younger than herself. Still quite boyish; with his mostly smooth face and his protruding ears that were blushing pink at the top in a way that Joan found attractive. He straightened up and gave Joan a smile.

"It is impressive, isn't it? It's a prototype, a calibration device, a design for a mechanical soldier." He paused for a moment with quiet pride, and then continued to speak in an eager fashion.

"I'll tell you what, though. The dancing is more impressive than you might think. You can't imagine the trouble we had just getting it to walk."

He looked across to the machine. The privates had hoisted it to its feet again but it did not seem capable of keeping its balance. They held it in place whilst the fifth man, the man in the white coat, made adjustments to the feet with a tiny screwdriver.

"It will probably take some time to recalibrate. Would you like a cup of tea while we're waiting? Maybe I can explain a little more about what's going on."

He led Joan across the floor; the brushed felt soles of her shoes slipped a little on the polished wood as she followed.

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Just milk please. I've got to watch my figure."

"Of course," said the Captain. He handed her a cup and then realized there was nowhere to sit. Joan gave a little smile at his discomposure.

"Let's stay standing for the moment," she said. "It was a long journey here in that staff car. It's nice to be on my feet."

Captain Slipper blushed faintly. "Very well. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to be rude now. Everything you see tonight is of the highest secrecy. You knew that before you came. We go to extreme lengths to maintain that secrecy. This camp was supposedly abandoned eight years ago, two years after the end of the war. You have been chosen not only because of your ability but because you are a single woman with no living relatives and, well... Anyway, it's Saturday night and... well..."

*There is no one to miss me or wonder where I am tonight,* thought Joan bitterly.

The Captain was embarrassed. He pressed on quickly, waved his arm in the direction of the gunmetal machine. The fifth man was now working busily on its head.

"Well, anyway." He coughed, embarrassed. "You know, the next war will not be fought by men. Aeroplanes, atomic bombs, radar: all these developments make the human soldier redundant. So what to do next? Well... eleven years ago the Americans had robot turrets in the B29 bomber. This is the natural extension: the mechanical soldier. The idea was first mooted 1946, but has

proved harder to implement than we first thought."

He shook his head. Joan noticed for the first time the faint edge of close-cropped ginger hair running down behind his ears from beneath his cap.

"Harder than we would have believed. It's taken us ten years just getting something that could move over varying terrain. Early on we thought we'd just use wheels but it didn't work. Couldn't get the machine up steps. We tried tank tracks, little helicopters. Too impractical. Not flexible enough. It had to have legs." He gave a sigh. "Do you know how complicated walking is? It strikes me as a miracle that we can stand up at all."

"It's all about balance," said Joan. "Any dancer could tell you that."

"Of course," said Captain Slipper. "Hence your presence." He shook his head again. "You should have seen some of the early ones. They worked on something called ZMP, Zero Moment Position. They were always perfectly balanced. Centre of gravity always over one foot. Amazing things to watch walking, but you just had to push them and they fell over. Trying to get them to climb a flight of stairs..."

He smiled to himself. "Anyway, they've got better. This is the best yet. I'm told it walks just like we do. It's always falling, always correcting its balance. Even when you think it's standing, it's still falling. So I'm told, anyway. If you think that dance looked clumsy, don't. If you'd seen some of the other machines we'd had you'd be seriously impressed... What's wrong?"

Joan was looking at the floor, trying not to blush.

"What's the matter?" asked Captain Slipper again. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," said Joan. "I'm sorry. I don't want to be rude, but it's not the machine's fault it fell. It was yours. You lost the rhythm at the corner. The machine was off balance and you pushed. If that had been your girlfriend you'd have pushed her over too."

"I haven't got... Oh." The Captain looked mortified for a moment, but he quickly recovered. "Well. That's why you are here, of course. The machine needs further calibrating. We have taken it so far, but it was decided that an expert in movement was needed to take it further. There was a lot of discussion, but in the end a dancer was chosen. I have to say, I helped swing the decision. I'm considered something of a dancer myself."

He suddenly looked embarrassed again. "Well, thought I was, anyway."

"You did very well," Joan lied quickly.

Captain Slipper gave a delighted smile. "Well, we want you to teach the machine to dance. Everything that you do will help us tune it further."

Joan looked at the machine in disbelief. "You want me to teach that to dance? To dance what?"

The Captain looked a little uneasy. "Everything. The waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, tango."

Joan gave a half smile. "What about Latin?" she asked.

"Whatever you think," replied the Captain. "Anything that will help it to move gracefully, to keep its balance in any situation."

Joan looked at the machine again and tried to imag-

ine taking its hand for a Rumba. She shook her head and gave a laugh.

"Are you sure its safe?" she asked.

"One hundred percent. We wouldn't have asked you here otherwise."

At the other end of the hall the white-coated man had finished his adjustments. The privates let go of the machine and it stood upright again. Joan walked slowly towards the machine. It wasn't that much taller than she was, she noticed, not much taller than a man. It just looked bigger. There was something imposing about its wide gunmetal chassis. She noticed that she didn't feel nervous. Instead she felt a wild reckless excitement bubbling inside her. To think she could have been sitting at home, drinking Ovaltine and listening to the wireless. Instead here she was at the heart of everything, doing something important.

Before she could stop herself she reached out one hand and took hold of the machine's. It gripped it lightly, feeling surprisingly soft and gentle. She suddenly halted and turned to face Captain Slipper.

"It doesn't seem right what you've been doing. Shouldn't it lead?"

The Captain looked confused and Joan gave a little giggle.

"It's a war machine. You had it dancing the woman's steps whilst you led. Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

The Captain's mouth was a wide O of astonishment.

"You know, I never even thought..." he said.

"Never mind," said Joan. "We'll work that out later on."

She counted to three out loud and then pushed forward. They began to waltz.

Joan taught the machine to waltz properly. Captain Slipper had pulled it around the room by the arm, Joan pulled it close to her so she could push its metal stomach with her own. They glided around the floor to a faint hissing and popping, the machine's legs lifting and dropping in time to her own. The machine learned quickly, it followed her directions perfectly. The trick was to keep the "woman" slightly off balance at all times so that she had no doubt in which direction to move. Joan found that she was quite enjoying herself. It was rare to dance with a student this responsive.

After about an hour the man in the white coat checked his watch and nodded to the Captain who called to Joan to stop. She danced the machine to a halt. It seemed a shame to do so; it really had been a pleasurable experience. She gave the machine's hand a little squeeze as they disengaged. The white-coated man at her side didn't seem to notice. He was beaming up at his machine.

"We need to make a recording of the machine's settings and recalibrate. It's still at the design stage, it wanders out of tune very quickly."

Joan said nothing. If anything, the machine seemed smoother and more responsive than when she had begun that evening. The Captain gave her a smile.

"Will you be coming back next week?"

"Of course," said Joan. "It's a pleasure to dance with."

The Captain gave a delighted smile. "Excellent. You are

very good. Maybe you can show me a few steps next time?"

"Of course," said Joan.

She paused at the door of the hall as the privates wheeled back in the machine's trolley. Looking back she could see the machine standing patiently beneath the lights. The glassy lenses of its eyes gazed unseeing at the floor.

It was snowing when Joan arrived at the hall the next week. Her winter coat smelled of cheap mutton and boiled cabbage: the unmistakable odour of her lodgings. She took it off as soon as she entered the hall and laid it across the trestle table. The machine was kneeling in the middle of the floor, the top of its head opened up to the world. The white-coated man was gazing inside with a thoughtful expression. He didn't seem to notice Joan come up behind her. He started when she spoke.

"Is it all right?" she asked.

The white-coated man looked up and down the room for assistance. "I'm not sure you should be looking inside here," he muttered.

Joan found herself leaning a little closer to see inside the machine's head. "I'm sure it's okay," she murmured. "I've signed the Official Secrets Act."

She caught a glimpse of black and silver movement.

"This isn't covered by the Official Secrets Act," replied the man. He suddenly smiled, as if he didn't care anyway. "I suppose the fact that you are here is enough. I'm Eric."

He didn't hold out a hand, he simply resumed his study of the machine.

"I'm Joan."

"I know."

The machine's head was filled with thousands of fine rods, packed close like spaghetti in a jar. They rose and fell in gentle waves as Joan watched.

"You know," said Eric thoughtfully, "some people try to build machines that think using electricity and switches. It's a dead end: it'll never work. The trouble is, you see..." At this point he pulled out and incredibly thin pair of tweezers from his pocket. He reached into the machine's head.

"The trouble is," he murmured again, "with electricity and switches, you get the same thing happening over and over again." Joan thought he was reaching for one of the impossibly fine rods with his tweezers, but she suddenly noticed that a dome of glass covered them. Instead, Eric began to adjust a series of tiny wheels set to one side of the dome. He continued to speak as he worked.

"I mean, you flick a light switch down, the light comes on. You flick it up; it goes off. You've just described your system. What else can happen? There is no scope for variation or learning or improvement. Ahh! Got it."

He twisted the tiny wheel once more and leant back to smile at Joan. "Robert here, however, has an analogue brain. Its thought patterns are mapped out using the relative velocities of the rods and their positions with respect to each other, but the rods are a mechanical system. They will never be in quite the same position twice. That sort of infinite variation can never be achieved by an electrical thinking machine."

He straightened up and flipped the machine's head

closed.

The machine slowly rose to its feet. Eric watched it with a proud smile. "You've no idea what an achievement it was to get it to stand up by itself."

There was a sudden draught of cold air and Captain Slipper entered the hall brushing snow from his coat. "Sorry I'm late," he called. "I got held up with, well... Anyway, are we ready to begin?"

"Yes," said Eric. He smiled at Joan who took the machine's hand and led it to the middle of the floor. They assumed a ready position, the machine's stomach pressing into hers, both of them leaning back so they were caught in a dynamic tension that seemed to hang on the edge of the moment. They paused and then Joan leant forward so that the machine fell backwards and then... they were dancing. She guided the machine around the floor, recalling the previous week's lesson. The machine followed her steps perfectly, they were moving in perfect synchronization except...

"It feels different. It's not the same," said Joan stopping suddenly. "What has changed since last week?"

Captain Slipper and Eric exchanged glances. Captain Slipper spoke first. "I can't tell you." The pair looked at each other again, guiltily. "You must realize, though, that this machine has not been built to dance with you. It has other... purposes."

Joan looked up at the gunmetal grey body of the machine. It did seem different, now that she came to look. Not in its build, but rather in the way that it held itself. It seemed sharper, more alert. Its steps had been perfect, but that little bit more efficient, that little bit more powerful. She touched the pearls that hung around her neck and came to a decision.

"I'm going to teach it the man's steps now," she said thoughtfully. "Will it understand?"

Captain Slipper looked at Eric who nodded and then answered Joan. "It should do. It is supposed to be capable of analysis, extrapolation and deduction. Just pull it towards you and it should get the idea."

Joan nodded and reached out to the machine with her other hand, the right hand. There was a moment's hesitation. The machine turned its head slowly, the glassy lenses of its eyes travelling from one of Joan's hands to the other. It looked on as Joan leant back slightly, and after another slight hesitation the machine moved forward, pressing its metal stomach into Joan's. It seemed to be getting the idea. It flexed its legs a couple of times to get the rhythm and then pushed forward. Joan found herself being led around the room by an expert partner. The machine guided her perfectly; its right hand pressed lightly against her back, middle finger in line with the strap of her brassiere, it sent her this way and that with the barest pressure of its hand and a turning of its upper body. Joan felt herself completely at ease, wrapped in the strong hold, she all but forgot where she was, whisked around the room in perfect safety.

She had circled the room three times before she realized how quickly they were going, so gradual had the machine's acceleration been. She almost panicked. What if the machine couldn't stop? What if it would dance

around faster and faster until she couldn't keep up? What if she tripped, exhausted, and it just dragged her limp body around the floor? The machine did not seem at all perturbed. It still moved in perfect rhythm; the only sign of strain was a slight increase in the volume of the hissing and popping in its legs as the grey feet lifted themselves from the wooden floor and delicately spread themselves out as they were replaced. How could she stop it? How could it learn how to stop? When Joan led, she stopped the dancing by a gradual *rallentando* at the appropriate moment. How would the machine know this was desired? She opened her mouth to call out to the Captain for help and then realization dawned. She felt so stupid.

She simply broke the rhythm, slowed to a gradual walk, and stopped. The machine was learning from her. What else would it do but copy her? The realization filled her with a strange emotion. The way she had the potential to shape something so powerful...

Captain Slipper applauded her as she disengaged from the machine. He didn't notice her sudden, shocked expression.

"That was superb!" he called. "Incredible. What do you think, Stapleton?"

Eric was nodding in approval. "That was good. The machine is coming along excellently. We can move to stage two now."

Captain Slipper gave Eric a pained look. "I was talking about Miss Lifeson."

He was too taken with castigating Eric to notice that Joan was still gazing in awe at the machine.

Eric gave a shrug. "She was very good too," he said, but he only had eyes for his machine.

Captain Slipper finally noticed Joan's expression. He reached out and touched her hand gently. "I say, are you okay, Miss Lifeson?" he asked

Joan rubbed her hand gently. She seemed to come out of a trance. "Oh yes. I'm fine," she said softly. She must have imagined it, she decided. She spoke brightly: "Let's carry on. I think we'll try the foxtrot."

She took the machine's hand again and prepared to dance once more. *I did, I did imagine it*, she thought. *It couldn't have happened.* But she knew that it had. Just as the dance ended, the machine had gently squeezed her hand.

Joan woke in the night to the sound of the robot entering her room. She felt hot and sweaty and... She felt herself blushing in the dark. It wasn't the machine she had heard. The regular, pounding, rattling rhythm was the sound of her landlord's bed in the next room. She heard the faint gasping of her landlady and rolled onto her back, gazing up at the pale rectangle of moonlight that shone on her ceiling. She needed something: she was too ashamed to admit what it was. Had her life come to this?

Captain Slipper and Eric were deep in huddled debate as Joan entered the hall the next week. The machine stood patiently behind them, the glassy lenses of its eyes tilted up to the shallow metal cones of the light shades.

"Good evening," said Joan, briskly unbuttoning her coat. "What's the matter?"

"Technical stuff," said Eric shortly. "If you'd like to begin..."

Joan draped her coat across the trestle table and walked across the floor. She took hold of the machine's hand, pulled it towards her a little and leant backwards. The machine got the idea. They began to waltz. There was something there again. That same tautness in its steps: that idea of compressed violence in every movement. When the machine stepped towards her it was like the overture to battle, and yet, and yet... Everything about the step was perfect, the length, the sense of rhythm. They danced around the floor and the machine quickly regained its old equilibrium. The warmth was restored. Joan felt less as if she was dancing with a machine and more as if she was dancing with a lover. She hid the thought as soon as it appeared.

After a few circuits, when she felt she had recaptured the machine's spirit, she stopped and led Robert by the hand to the Captain and Eric.

"What do you do to it when I'm not here?" she asked. "It's like dancing with a stiletto blade."

"Classified," said Eric curtly. "Look, we're having a bit of a problem with Robert here."

"Don't get us wrong," interjected Captain Slipper quickly, "It's nothing that you have done. We're delighted with your work with the machine."

"Yes, well," said Eric, gazing pointedly at the Captain. "Anyway, I don't think it's giving too much away if I tell you that Robert here is not the only machine we have built."

Joan tried to conceal her surprise. She had assumed that Robert was unique. Still, it made sense when she thought about it.

Eric continued speaking. "We have... well, an unspecified number of other machines located within the grounds. Originally we had hoped to transfer Robert's mindset to the other machines. We thought that if you trained Robert we could synchronize the rods that make up his brain with those in the other machines."

"It doesn't work," interrupted Captain Slipper. He gazed eagerly at Joan. "Well, everything goes okay to begin with. The other machines can walk and dance, just like old Robert here, but after about ten minutes they just go crazy, lose all sense of balance and movement. Some of them just fall over. Others topple over and then began thrashing wildly. They're a danger to anyone nearby."

Eric's voice was cool as he took up the story. "We're not quite sure what is going on. Some have suggested it is because of the analogue nature of Robert's brain. They say we can never get a truly accurate reproduction of its mindset because of this." He flushed an angry red, and Joan could hear the rage that was bent tightly beneath his words. "Haven't they ever heard about tolerances? We can record Robert's mindset to eight decimal places. That is more than accurate enough. Surely they can see this? Even those who place their blind faith in switches and electrical currents..."

Captain Slipper gave a cough. He seemed embarrassed



by Eric's over-reaction. Joan felt a pricking of scorn. The Captain always seemed embarrassed by something. To think she had once found it attractive.

The Captain spoke. "Anyway, Eric, I think we're wandering off the point." He turned to Joan. "The point is, Miss Lifeson, we are wondering if there is some corruption in Robert's mindset. If there is, we may have to wipe Robert's mind completely and begin again."

"No!" said Joan involuntarily.

"Exactly," said Eric, misunderstanding her reaction completely. "The waste of all the work we have put in so far... So, we need to seek another way. We would like you to teach Robert a new dance. Something of a different style. Something that we can separate out from what it already knows. We are hoping to compare the two mind-sets, one before you have taught it, one after. Maybe in the comparison we can pinpoint the corruption."

"I thought maybe the Cha Cha Cha," said the Captain.

Joan shook her head. She could feel herself blushing at the thought of what she was about to suggest. She forced herself to speak in as calm a voice as possible.

"Perhaps. Or maybe the Rumba?"

She couldn't believe she had said it. Surely they would see right through her? Surely they would guess her motives?

Eric gave a shrug. "If you think so," he said.

Joan felt her stomach tighten. They hadn't guessed. She felt her skin come up in goosebumps.

"Very well," she said softly. She became very aware of herself as she stepped forward to face Robert. How small and delicate she was in comparison. How the soft wool of her skirt and jumper, the silk of her slip and her stockings compared to the gunmetal of the robot's skin. She compared the lipstick and the smell of her leather handbag as she had powdered her face in the car earlier that evening with the oily smell of the robot's body.

She reached out one hand, and the robot took it. It leant forward. "No," she murmured. "This one is different. I'll lead first. Follow me."

She straightened her right leg, bent her left and placed her weight there. Stretched out her left arm and bounced gently, getting the rhythm. The robot held her right hand in its left. It watched her intently, bouncing in time. Her heart was pounding as she began to count.

"... two, three, four, AND..." She swung her weight over her right leg and began to dance, forward on two, back on three, to the left on four AND back on two, forward on three, to the right on four... Rocking back and forth to the slow rhythm, Robert followed perfectly. Joan felt a warmth rising inside her. Robert understood the dance instinctively, as she had hoped, as she had known that he would. He mirrored her steps; they danced closely, ever so closely without ever quite touching. Each step suggested yearning. The Rumba was a dance that mirrored seduction, and the art of seduction lay in the promise, not in the fulfilment. Joan varied the dance, first a cucaracha, then a turn, then a spin, then out and back. Robert followed perfectly.

As they moved on the dance floor, Joan caught occasional glimpses of the Eric and the Captain watching her,

Eric with quiet, professional interest, the Captain with an expression that suggested something else entirely. Joan felt a rising scorn. Let the Captain stare, he couldn't understand. She added movement after movement to Robert's repertoire. Eventually, after fifteen minutes of this, she could wait no longer. She brought Robert to a halt and turned to face the Captain and Eric. She fought to keep her voice calm.

"That should be enough," she said. "Now I'll get Robert to take the lead."

Heart pounding she turned back to the robot. She held out her hand and adopted the opposite posture this time: straightening her left leg and bending her right. Robert understood immediately, as she knew he would. He bounced twice, three times and began to dance.

*Oh, he understood, thought Joan. He understood.* Robert could dance. In his movements she could feel the passion and the yearning that she had felt for him. The desire that Robert had first articulated by that squeeze of her hand. It was there, and it was real. Let them measure her partner to eight decimal places. There was room beyond that for something else. That would be her part of the machine. It was the only part that mattered. She felt scorn for Eric and his machines and instruments. She felt scorn for the captain and his army and whatever they did with poor Robert when she wasn't here. Here was something far subtler than their instruments could comprehend. Her dancing reached far deeper than they could even imagine. Deep enough to twist at the war machine's very soul and turn it to her purposes.

Joan sighed as the Robert pulled her in closer and closer and they began to turn, their bodies never quite touching...

Joan taught Robert the Samba and the Jive, the slow Foxtrot and the Quickstep, the Paso Doble and the Tango, but always she returned to the Rumba. Her weeks passed by in grey monochrome as she waited for the Saturday night in the hall when she would dance with Robert. Captain Slipper and Eric would meet her each week, respectively eagerly polite and professionally detached and she would smile politely and make conversation. They seemed more careworn each time they met. Something was preying on their minds, something external to the reality of the hall, but Joan paid it no attention. All the time spent in idle chatter with the two men she was waiting for the moment when her lover would take her in his arms and lead her onto the floor. The imagined music would take life inside her head and she would begin to dance with her partner, her perfectly attuned opposite: her soulmate. It was rare to meet a man who could guide her as expertly around the floor as Robert could, and Joan hid a rising scorn for those who even attempted it, but to meet a man who could not only guide her but could match her step for step, to perfectly mirror the emotions and feelings that went into each movement of the dance: that was impossible.

When, during the course of their dancing, Eric stopped her, it was unbearable. She would stand there, her anger thrust deep inside her, buried inside the respectable exterior of an impeccably pleated skirt and cotton blouse, as



Eric tried to explain whatever his current problem was.

"We've got a new angle Joan," he was saying, one evening in early spring, the pale sun just clinging to the edge of the high windows. "I'm surprised I never thought about it myself, it was obvious when it was mentioned: why not get Robert to teach to the other robots? We're not going to crack the recording problem. A group of the mathematicians claim to have proved that we'll never do it. It's all to do with the magnification of small perturbations in the initial set-up of a system."

He shook his head in gentle disbelief. "I asked them to show me the proof but they declined. Said it was top secret. They reckon it will be 20 years before the outside world catches up with Chaos Theory."

He shook his head in silent admiration. Joan gave a smile of polite interest. Robert swayed gently to the beat of the music, dancing to himself the way that Joan often did when she thought no one was watching. How she resented this time spent talking to Eric, time away from Robert's embrace. Nonetheless, she answered him in a voice as sweet as young girl's.

"How clever. So what do you want me to do?"

Eric gave a delighted smile. "I knew you'd understand. You're a clever woman, Joan. The Captain thinks so too. Well, we want you to take things back to basics. All these fancy movements you've been doing are very nice, but they're not adding anything to Robert's essential purpose. We want you to go back to the waltz. Slow and sure, as if you were teaching a complete beginner. We want the movements firmly imprinted in Robert's mindset, ready for when he teaches the others. Can you do that Joan?"

Joan felt her world collapsing inside her. Nonetheless, she found it within herself to smile at Eric and nod in agreement.

"Very well," she said, though she longed for nothing more than to take hold of Robert's hand and demand that he sweep aside this rude man who dared to trespass upon their time together.

She took hold of Robert firmly and spoke in a voice with just a hint of a tremor. "Now, Robert, a basic waltz. A-one, two, three..."

She stepped forward with her right leg straight, left leg bending and powering her on across the floor. Robert seemed confused at first. His normally perfect matching of her steps was slightly shaky. He felt anger too; Joan knew it. He wanted to cast off the restraints placed upon them by Eric and dance properly, dance with Joan. She could feel it in the stiffness of his powerful gunmetal arms, see it in the darkening of the lenses of his eyes, hear it in the petulance of the popping and hissing of his joints as he was restricted and restrained and forced to follow this simple inelegant path around the floor. She saw Captain Slipper's pink eager face as they danced, the pale sheen on his forehead and the puppy-dog look in his eyes, and she knew that he was going to ask her the question he had been screwing up his courage to ask these past few weeks.

She danced and danced, resenting every step until Eric was happy and then it was time to go. Still, Joan pretended not to notice and she took Robert's hand for one

more time. They danced the Rumba once more, and they both felt the joyful eagerness, the rightness that they were together again, and then, and then it was all over, and Joan was buttoning her coat, ready to go home. Eric led Robert out of the hall, and Joan watched her soul-mate as he hissed and popped through the door. Captain Slipper appeared at her side.

"That was truly wonderful," he said.

"Thank you," said Joan briskly.

The Captain held out her gloves for her. "I've often wished I could dance like that."

"It's just practice," replied Joan, taking the gloves from him and pulling them on.

"I'd love the opportunity to practice." Captain Slipper took a deep breath. The tips of his ears were coloured red. His pale red eyelashes flickered quickly as he spoke. "Joan, there is a dance being held here next Friday night. I'd be honoured if you would join me."

He looked at her, half embarrassed, half eager.

Inside Joan, pity mixed with scorn. Her face was a mask of polite apology. "Oh, Captain Slipper."

"Peter."

"Oh, Peter. I'm sorry if I led you to believe otherwise, but I couldn't possibly. I'm already spoken for."

"Oh." The Captain looked crestfallen.

"I do hope it's not too much of a disappointment."

"No, well, er... You know."

She gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Not at all, I understand, let me get the door."

He rushed to hold it open and Joan brushed past him, into the pale night, leaving Peter Slipper gazing sadly after her from the lit doorway.

Robert wasn't in the hall the next week. Only the Captain and Eric standing looking despondent. Joan knew right away that something was wrong.

"Where is Robert? What's the matter?" That was when she noticed what was odd about Eric. He wasn't wearing his white coat. Just a tweed jacket and brown corduroy trousers.

"What's going on?" she said, her voice rising in pitch despite herself.

Captain Slipper spoke first. "The project has been scaled right back."

"But why?"

Eric gave a resigned shrug. "It's still classified," he said, "but we might as well tell you. You'll hear it on the news soon enough."

He looked at the Captain, who gave a slow nod. Eric continued. "It's the Americans. They've convinced the government to go with some new scheme of theirs called Polaris. Basically they'll be firing atomic bombs from submarines. All the money that was to be spent on the development of Robert has been reallocated."

Captain Slipper's voice was filled with bitterness. "Stupid bloody Yanks and their schemes. They have no idea of elegance or subtlety. All they ever do is build things bigger and flashier. All they will have is another bomb. What we had was something with a soul..."

"So what's going to happen to Robert?" asked Joan. Her voice was shrill to her ears, but she didn't care.

Captain Slipper looked at her with sudden sympathy. "I'm sorry, Joan, we've had a week to get used to this news. You're hearing this for the first time. Well, Robert will be okay. They've just changed his role. It's the rest of the robots who will suffer. They're being dismantled as we speak."

Stuff the other bloody robots, thought Joan. But she managed to calm herself. "Oh," she said softly, deliberately keeping her voice low. "But what about Robert. What is this new role?"

"Well, he's being reassigned as a War Robot. He has been transferred to another station for training in, well... From what I understand, the powers that be have some sort of a role as an assassin in mind for him."

He paused and looked at the dance floor thoughtfully, remembering his robot waltzing in Joan's arms.

Joan wore a perplexed frown. "Reassigned as a War Robot?" she said. "But I thought that was what he was?"

Eric looked vaguely surprised. "A War Robot? Robert? Who said that? No, Robert was just the prototype. Not even that. Robert was the calibration device. Robert was a recorder, a data-gatherer. He was like a tape recorder, but he didn't just record your voice. He measured human responses and movement and feeling and played them right back at you. He was a mirror that reflected movement and expression and feeling. A mirror. And a damn good one, if I say so myself. He picked up your dancing extremely well I thought, not that I'm an expert."

"Hear, hear," said Captain Slipper. "I thought so myself. He danced with expression, he seemed to move with feeling. Your feelings, Miss Lifeson. You know, I think that, no matter what use Robert is put to, he will always bear an imprint of you..."

But Joan wasn't listening. She was just absorbing what Eric had said. A mirror, that's what he called Robert. A machine designed to measure movement, but one that did it so well it picked up the underlying emotion and played it right back at you. It couldn't be true. No, what Robert had felt for her was real. She knew it. It matched her own feelings so perfectly it was as if he was her soulmate. She had known it from the first time she had squeezed his hand and he had squeezed back.

Robert had loved her. He had to have done.

"Are you okay, Joan?" asked Eric suddenly. He was gazing at her intently.

"I'm fine," replied Joan brusquely. "Do go on, Captain."

The Captain continued speaking, but Joan wasn't listening, standing alone in an empty hall, in an empty army camp in the middle of an empty world.

Tony Ballantyne lives in Oldham, Lancashire. He last appeared here with "Real Man" (issue 174) – which was preceded by such stories as "Single-Minded" (issue 162), "A New Beginning" (issue 163), his two "Restoring the Balance" pieces (issues 167 and 168), and the ingenious comedy "Indecisive Weapons" (issue 172).

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# Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain

Darrell Schweitzer

*Justin Noyes, this is for you. Some of it is the work of the imagination, the paradox being that only the imagined parts are purely true, for the rest is clouded by passion, by memory, by human consciousness.*

*I do not think you will ever understand. But bear with me. Remember that we used to be friends once.*

When they first take me, there is that moment of unbearable pain, as the limbs, or tendrils, or whatever they are penetrate the skull. I more sense than actually see the great bodies hovering above me in the air. They seem to condense out of nothingness. Then the hard, sharp claws take hold, and I am pierced; but numbness soon follows as if some intensely cold fluid were pouring down into my body. I barely feel the alien limbs sliding down through my neck, into my spinal cord. They have control of my nervous system now. I feel something seize hold firmly under the arms from *inside my own body* and then I am well into the air. The great wings spread above, not so much flapping as vibrating in some way human senses cannot quite follow, some way that defies gravity.

Inevitably, I look down. The ground falls away swiftly

now, as in a rocket launch, only I don't feel any acceleration, only the cold, and then not even that. Somewhere along the way I have stopped breathing, but I don't feel that either.

The ground falls away, then the Earth. The curved edge is clearly visible, and the terminator between night and day. The roaring in my ears becomes utter silence, and there are stars everywhere, brilliant, unflickering.

There's a glimpse of a crescent Moon. My captors pull away from the Sun, into the eternal darkness. The stars. The darkness. Silence. All is abstraction, my body a speck, a mote, something I can barely remember. If I look down, I might see my legs and feet trailing against the starfields.

Or nothing. It is like a long dream.

It has only begun.

Justin, you couldn't possibly have known, when I finally walked up the dirt path to that Vermont farmhouse, "the old Akeley place" as I had heard it called in my childhood; as I clambered up over the stones because the road was long since washed out and impassable; you couldn't

possibly have known how far I had come, not merely in miles, which was no more than the distance between New York and Brattleboro, but the distance in my life itself, midway in the course of which, as Dante so aptly put it, I wandered into a darkened wood and became lost.

I knocked on the door. There were no lights. The night was very, very dark, as only a Vermont night can be when there is no moon.

I knocked again. The door opened. There you were holding a barely flickering kerosene lantern. You stared up at the brilliant stars. I turned to look too. They were very beautiful, yes, but you and I both knew how to look at them and see them as something more. I was afraid, I admit. I think you were too.

You just stood there. I leaned against the doorway and shook a rock out of my shoe.

"Hello again at last," I said.

You stood there.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

You seemed to come back to yourself, from somewhere else.

"Oh, it's you, Opie."

"You still call me that."

"You still are that."

Justin, when we first met, in college, I was a naïve 18-year-old freshman from rural Ass-End-of-Nowhere (Vermont) and you were the epitome of all that was urban and sophisticated and slightly dangerously decadent, not to mention two years older than me. Oh, I knew you slightly when you used to sit around the offices of Villanova University's literary magazine, *The Lynx*, and expostulate on art or the meaning of life or the mysteries of the universe, or whatever you were into that week. I was just one of the audience, perhaps its most uncritical member. I didn't know much about you. You were rumoured to be rich. They said your father had started a cult back in the '50s, then died, mysteriously, which only made you all the more mysterious. They said you were a writer, maybe a philosopher. I remember that I admired your poetry, too, which somebody called Baudelairean. I remember how I laughed, then puzzled over your line, "Evil is just a passing fad." It was then that you noticed me for the first time and pointed right at me and said, "So, get it printed on a t-shirt."

I probably would have if I'd known how.

But I didn't know very much then. I was the sort of boy who was beaten up by underclassmen in high school, laughed at because I read odd books and entertained odd ideas (however furtively), largely ignored by my family; and at that age I was looking hard for someone to follow, a mentor of any sort, who would take me under his wing and recognize my special talents (assuming that I had any) and tell me the secret of how everything worked, so I could avoid pain.

And there you were.

Then you literally grabbed me by the scruff of the neck as if I were a kitten and dragged me up the stairs into your oh-so-exclusive private dorm room on the third floor, which you shared with, I think, nobody. It fit. I mean, you

were special, with connections, or something. You dragged me up and all sorts of crazy thoughts went through my head, up to and including thoughts of the loss of my precious virginity, not that I could necessarily even formulate the phrase "homosexual encounter" and of course later I understood how fantastic (and stupid) it was to imagine that you would ever descend to the earthly plane of carnality at all. But, yeah, the dread was there and also a kind of expectation, as if yes, you finally were singling me out for something special.

So up we went, and I fluttered and babbled nonsense and struggled to avoid tripping or dropping my textbooks.

You let go of me, and with a melodramatic flourish got out a key.

"Opie, I want to show you something."

"But my name's Brian."

"I think of you as Opie, from Mayberry, *The Andy Griffith Show*, the nice, simple Southern country kid –"

"But I'm from Vermont."

"Aw jeepers –" You laughed and turned the key, then looked down at me. It helped, for dramatic effect, that you were more than a head taller than me and maybe 70 pounds heavier. "Opie, I want you to take a look at this –"

You swung the door open, and I let out a gasp and unconsciously or masochistically or whatever, I really did exclaim, "Jeepers!" (because I knew you wanted me to) when you flicked on the light and I saw that the room was filled with some of the most amazing artwork I had ever seen or ever hoped to see. Did you know, even then – yes, I suppose you did, because you seemed to know everything about me, about everyone – did you know that I was trying to be a painter myself, and taking all sorts of art classes and getting nowhere? The kindest thing one of my teachers said, after looking at my attempts at landscapes, was, "Mr Simmons, you might become a decent cartoonist. Think of Charles Schulz or whoever draws *Miss Peach*."

But here –

"Jeepers..."

Here in brilliantly subtle, bold colours were *landscapes* or *cityscapes*, but depicting no scenes anyone had ever beheld on this Earth, strange jungles of pale, glowing tree-like growths and vines like living ice that hung from the sides of black towers that reached up into an equally black sky, where no sun shone, and the stars did not seem quite right, somehow. Words cannot begin to capture the power of the image. I felt the cold, the distance, the strangeness, and I somehow had the sense that all of this was alive – the jungle growths, the vines, even the towers. As I looked more closely I saw that there seemed to be things, animals of some sort, creatures, and human beings caught in those frigid vines, dangling there like the prey a spider wraps in silk and leaves dangling in the web for later. I was afraid even looking at what must have been a fantasy image, because it was so real, as real and alive as the black, winged monstrosities that seemed to flicker through some of the scenes and shift slightly whenever my eye turned away from them.

It was both beautiful and terrible beyond belief.

"Behold the Gardens of Ynath," you whispered.

"Huh? What?"

I noticed a half-finished painting on an easel, and brushes and paints on a stand beside it.

"Your work?"

"Yes, when the spirit is upon me. But I am not entirely sure it is *my* work."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't."

And the dreamer wakes, from out of his dream, into his dream. In the dream of the man who was dreaming, the dreamt man awoke. *Pace* Borges. Like that. All is real, and nothing is real. Lao Tzu dreaming he is the butterfly and the butterfly dreaming he is Lao Tzu.

The dreamer awakes, and for an instant the cold is pain. He looks down at his useless legs dangling amid the starfields. He looks down again, and hours, days, years have passed, and the great planet Jupiter stretches out below, farther than the eye can see or the mind comprehend. He has the sensation of falling, of accelerating, and he knows, somehow, that his winged bearers are swooping into the planet's gravity well, for a slingshot boost, the kind space-probes use to gain momentum when coming to the other side, from the forward motion of the planet.

Dreaming still, I look down and notice that my shoes, loafers, which are no more appropriate for interplanetary travel than for climbing a hillside in Vermont, have fallen off, and are tumbling, down, down into the multi-coloured cloud bands, and my stockinged feet drag slowly across the turning planet. One sock slides off, and I see that the skin of my foot has turned a dark blue.

But there is no more pain.

Only darkness, as Jupiter fades away and I am carried deep, deep into the endless, nighted abyss.

Justin, we were more than friends. I was your slave for years, Renfield to your Dracula. I would have done anything for you. You knew that.

You knew too that I wouldn't cry out, even when you took hold of me again, and maybe I was still afraid of what you might have intended for my nubile self.

But it wasn't that. It was never that.

You sat on the couch. I sat at your feet, back to you, so that your legs held my shoulders in place, and you placed your terrible, speaking hands on either side of my head, and somehow you were inside my mind then. I think, I thought then at least and for a long time after, that it was some kind of hypnosis, because I didn't believe in magic, or telepathy, and I had an absurd flash of an image of Mr Spock with his Vulcan Mind Meld. Then I stopped thinking at all, because I was soaring, with you, into the vision you deigned to share with me, and it *was* a kind of rape, a head-rape, or mind-fuck, to use the common parlance, as I, too, shared the vision and we soared through the black spaces, beyond the Earth, to places with impossible names, to Yuggoth and Shaggai and the darkness beyond; to the Gardens of Ynath, where, somehow I knew, ancient intelligences waited, minds frozen in ice for all eternity but alive for all eternity; waited, to talk to us.

It was all so real. I seemed to come right to the threshold. I could just begin to hear the ancient voices speaking, like a buzzing inside my head, just begin to feel their soothing, timeless wisdom. I wanted it so badly to continue, to become clearer –

And then I fell away, and I was in the room with you again, and I think I did cry out, and maybe I even wept.

After a very long time, you sighed and said, "Opie, now you know about the old family curse. My father had these visions, and my grandfather before them. They dreamed them every night, as I do. They knew many things which I myself am only beginning to discover, but they, too, reached for the Gardens of Ynath, and could never reach them. They leapt. They fell short. Now you know what it feels like."

At long last, I asked a very sensible question. "Why are you sharing this with me?"

You smiled, but only, I think, from a sense of irony. You did not laugh at me. I will thank you for that. I think you answered me honestly when you said, "A combination of ego and loneliness. I want a disciple."

Now maybe one or both of us were out of our minds. That would have been the logical explanation. But I didn't think so, not then.

Justin, if you had been Christ calling out to me, "Come, follow me," I would have come and followed, and hoped I would be promoted to apostle one day.

It was only much later that I understood that you were taking me up to the mountaintop to show me the treasures of the world (not to mention the universe), which would be mine if I would but fall down and worship you. And I *did* fall down and worship you, but if you were devoting this much attention to plain old Opie, a.k.a. Brian Simmons, it must have been some kind of dry run, to prepare you for the Big Job which was to come later.

Get thee behind me, Justin.

I never said that. Not until now.

In the Vermont farmhouse, as we groped through the dark and you paused to light one candle, then another, and finally a third, I could tell that time had not treated you well. It had been 25 years. Thirty? I don't know any more. You were starting to look old, your relatively gigantic frame bent, your face lined, haggard, your voice raspy.

I on the other hand was pretty much the same as ever. True, in middle age I became bald as an egg, but if I kept my hat on I was the same old Opie.

The place stank. It was a wreck. We had to walk gingerly where the floorboards had been torn up.

"Answers," you muttered. "Looking for answers."

Gaining courage, I asked, "Did you find any?"

You glanced down at the torn-up floor and said nothing.

Awakening once more, I gaze into the greater darkness, the great hole in space, the black mouth that swallows stars.

Accelerating, close to the speed of light, the winged ones bear me into that darkness. Colours shift, stars streaming like some brilliantly luminous fluid, rippling from red to golden to unbearably brilliant violet.



It's not enough to say that you changed my life, Justin. You *were* my life. I would have told everyone on campus of your genius, whether they wanted to listen or not, but you commanded me to keep everything a secret, because the world wasn't ready yet, you said, because misunderstandings could happen, because it could be the end of the human race if somebody screwed up.

Yes, you told me that. I took it as par for the course. Call me Opie. Call me Renfield. Call me whatever you like.

So I learned to deceive, to hold things close, to walk through life as if the mundane things around me mattered, when I knew how trivial they were. I got straight 'A's. I gave up trying to become an artist. I studied science, then accounting. It didn't matter. My parents thought I was "coming down to Earth at last."

Ha ha. I don't remember if we ever found time to laugh at that one.

Justin, I think the most amazing revelation of all to me was not that you and your family had shared visions of alien worlds, or had even spoken, treated with, or served intelligences from Beyond, but that *you were from Vermont too*, silly as that sounds. We were almost neighbours, but I'd grown up in Brattleboro, which is a little nothing town, where, yeah, kids rode skateboards and played pinball (before there were video games) and watched the same reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show* on television that everybody else did.

You, on the other hand, were raised way up in the hills, but were by no means a rustic, being privately tutored by your rich, eccentric daddy, who was a man of great culture and education, like his father before him and his before him, all of them devoted to, yes, "research" which had something to do with gardens of ice and winged creatures from outer space. That your father had perished, when the family mansion burned down, or exploded, or just plain vanished didn't seem to have discomfited you too much. You had his bank accounts. And his talents.

You told me a lot more that summer, when I brought you home with me. On the train on the way up, you told me the whole story, like a story, and so I tell it like a story, because it seems, as we do, entirely fictional: that the Outer Ones or Old Ones or whatever you want to call them had descended from the sky into the Vermont hills sometime in the remote past. They were described in various Indian myth cycles, and in folklore whispered from generation to generation. It was rumoured, too, that sometimes they recruited human agents, or even spokesmen, and that one day, when it pleased them, they would make themselves known to mankind, and history as we know it would come to an end.

Their purpose, no one had ever figured out. Some guessed it was mining, but what kind of *rock* would be worth journeys over quadrillions of miles and millions of years?

You didn't think it was that at all. Your theory was that *other* entities lay sleeping in the Earth, vast powers that orthodox science had never suspected, nor could ever conceive, that the Outer Ones came to speak with them, to *exchange dreams*, and humanity was no more a part of the process than if the greatest scholars and philosophers

and poets had come together for some vast, sublime conversation and all these sages just happened to be infested with fleas, and we were the fleas.

"Maybe we can join the flea circus," I said.

"Maybe we already have," you replied.

Now the really funny thing about that trip and that visit was how my parents treated you.

Father gave you his bluff, hearty handshake and a slap on the back.

You turned to me and smiled gently.

At dinner, that first night, Mother said, "Brian, I am so glad you are starting to make friends. I was worried about you for a while there."

Father put down his fork, but still spoke with his mouth full. "That's it, son. We want you to be normal."

How very funny.

Then you and I announced we were going "camping." Mother took us aside and said, "Justin, I trust you because you're Brian's friend, so I just want to ask you to look after him." That was funny too.

The unfunny part came later. Off we went, with backpacks and tent. We spent several days in the woods. The air was so wonderfully clear. The sky at night was intensely beautiful, as it is in Vermont, so far from the cities. But you and I looked at the stars in a different way, knowing that among them, or beyond them lay the Gardens of Ynath, where the Outer Ones might carry us in transcendence and glory, where we might live forever and know all the mysteries of the cosmos.

That was your promise to me.

That was what I hoped for, longed for.

And my mother thought we were off being "normal."

We came to places where ancient stones stood in strange circles, where, you told me, the Indians, and some wild, degenerate white men once danced naked on moonless nights, hoping to draw down the Outer Ones to accept barbarous sacrifices. We came to a hill filled with noises, where rocks somehow pressed together beneath our feet, making a trembling, muted thunder.

And by the edge of a broad stream, in the white sand, we found the tracks, where something had walked, leaving prints like pairs of crab claws pressed into the ground.

I knew that certain people who ventured too far into such places, often did not return, or if they did, they were so changed in subtle, terrible ways, that it would have been better if they had not.

But we were not afraid. We had our visions. In our dreams, we reached to the very edge of the Gardens of Ynath, and we heard its whispers.

Then it happened. We camped before the mouth of a cave on one of those moonless nights which the local people had once learned to dread, and out of that cave rose what first seemed an enormous cloud, but which resolved itself against the stars into thousands of winged, flapping shapes, huge things, trailing long limbs and tails, like winged jellyfish I thought, no, like flying crabs, but really like nothing anyone has ever described or put into words or ever could.

We had sought them out. We found them. You stood

up. You waved a flashlight and shouted, "Here I am! Come and take me! I want to go!"

I. Me. Me. Me. Meaning you, Justin Noyes. Just one. Singular.

I think that was how the spell broke. If you'd said "Take us," oh, how the whole history of the world might have been different –

"Take me!"

I wasn't your friend. I wasn't even your instrument any more. Was I ever more than an excuse to get back to Vermont?

"Take me!" you cried out, and they swarmed over you like a tide. They reached down. They *took* you.

But what about dumb little Opie? Did you notice? Did you wonder?

No, I don't think you noticed or cared that I huddled there in the tent, shit-scared, motionless, that somehow, when the time was upon us I *wasn't* ready to go, that I thought back over all sorts of incoherent things: games I'd played as a child, my electric train set, collecting butterflies, what I was learning in school, the names of all the presidents, anything, everything that bound me to humanity, to the Earth.

I wasn't ready. At the crucial moment I turned away. I buried myself under a sleeping bag.

And I dreamed terrible visions all that night, and it seemed to me that great swarms of the Outer Ones poured down from stars, bearing metal tubes of some kind, perhaps weapons, which released a gas, a *darkness*, which covered over the Earth's cities. The lights went out one by one, until all the world was still, and then the *stars* began to fade; and I saw the Outer Ones descending upon me at last, reaching out with those sharp, double-claws of theirs; and they spoke among themselves, making a humming, buzzing noise, and I was no more a part of the conversation than a flea would be.

When I awoke screaming in the morning, you were gone.

I left the tent where it was. I wandered for what must have been several days in a delirium. When I finally made it back home, bruised, cut, starving, my clothing torn, one of my shoes missing, I fell into my mother's arms and couldn't say anything for quite some time. At last I was able to say that there had been a misunderstanding, and that you, Justin, weren't coming back.

And my father just shook his head and said, "What did he turn out to be? Some kind of faggot?"

But you *did* come back, didn't you?

I am getting ahead of myself.

Justin, this is the part of the story where the hero grows up. Childhood ends. Things change.

And then I became normal.

I became more normal than you could have ever imagined. I banished my dreams, my visions. By sheer force of will, a force you probably never suspected I had, I turned from the Gardens of Ynath, and looked upon them no more.

And when I became a man, I put aside childish things.

You might even say that I developed a backbone, a sense of self-worth, a separate identity.

Suffice it to say that when I went back to college the following semester, I became aggressively normal. I worked hard, dressed plainly, earned good grades, got drunk at the occasional fraternity party, and voted straight Republican when Ronald Reagan was running. I moved to New York after graduation, where I could hide from the brilliant stars beneath the city's glare, and never gaze up at the Gardens of Ynath. My last concession to my allegedly artistic nature was an attempt to become a set-designer for an Off-Off-Very-Off-Broadway theatre company, but before long I ended up keeping the accounts for them, because I really did have a talent for numbers, and when the accounts were all straight goose-eggs, I moved on.

Later, I met Melanie, who worked in banking, and was even more normal than I. I took her once to my parents' place in Brattleboro, but she hated Vermont, the country air and the possibility that there might actually be *things* (insects) flying in it, which she had never experienced growing up in Jersey City; so we were an obvious match and married soon thereafter.

And, yeah, we made lots of money, bought a big house in Queens, raised the statistically normal 2.5 children (I exaggerate but slightly), and together we kept statistics, became statistics, and brought into the world more little statistics, and, in short, had a life.

It wasn't a great life. But it was a life. It was *ours*. Melanie was a good woman. I think I even loved her.

And then you came back, returned to Earth, came out of hiding, or whatever.

I remember that I first heard of you in what was doubtless intended as a comedy spot on a late-night "fact" show of the sleazier variety: THAT'S INCREDIBLE. VERMONT GURU SAYS HE HAS BEEN ON ANOTHER PLANET FOR YEARS AND NOW HAS A MESSAGE FOR ALL OF US.

You had commanded me, once, to keep these things a secret, because the world was not ready. But now? Talk shows, tabloids, a best-selling book which was the biggest thing since that last one about the guy who was abducted and bugged by aliens disguised as giant peanuts or some damn such.

You started a religion. You gathered hundreds of followers, then thousands to your old estate in the Vermont hills, until the place was dotted with tents and swarming with reporters and cops and unhappy locals. Was this going to be another Waco, Jonestown, what? The story went that you were waiting for the world to end in 2000 and everybody was going to be carried to Heaven in a flying saucer, or at least that's how the newspapers told it.

And then you started writing to me. I don't know how you got my address, but you got it, and the letters started coming. I burned the first as soon as I realized who it was from. I intercepted several more before Melanie found them, but of course she did find them in the end, and so we sat up one night at the kitchen table over coffee and I told her the deep dark secret of how I had known this real weirdo in college and maybe even associated with him for a while.

But I was better now, I assured her. I was normal.

A great revelation is at hand, you wrote. *Come and join us. Be a part of the glory of transformation.*

"Sounds like he thinks he's Christ," Melanie said.

"Something like that."

"And you hung out with this guy?"

"He wasn't quite as wacky then."

But you wouldn't leave me alone. You got on my e-mail and send me vaguely threatening letters, all of which boiled down to *Join me now before it is too late*.

Frankly I was glad when that raid happened, when your "compound" got flattened by the Feds looking for guns, drugs, wild sex orgies, abused children, or human sacrifices, none of which would have interested you – or your Masters – in the slightest. I was glad, not because I ever wished you any ill, but because I wanted to be rid of you, and I thought I was. Never mind that three prosecutors in a row died of heart attacks, and none of the witnesses would talk, and your followers just dispersed and went back to their lives as if they had awakened from some long dream, the victims of collective amnesia.

Never mind that. You dropped off radar. Good riddance. Gone. I went on with my normal life.

And it was only a year ago that I got your postcard, postmarked Vermont (of course), which made me so very afraid.

*Opie, you wrote, I know I have made mistakes, and there are misunderstandings, but I know too that you will come back to me and join me on the Great Journey, because They who have directed and shaped our lives all this time have ordained it so. Don't resist. Obey your dreams and all will still be well. But do not stray from the path, for the dangers of the dark spaces are very real.*

What the hell was that supposed to mean to a normal guy like me? I think you knew. I think you, the Outer Ones, somebody *made* it mean something, as I strayed from the ordained path, into the darkness.

I don't have to tell you then any of the details about how, as he approached school age, my son Matthew had motor problems and speech problems and was declared autistic by the time he was six. Nor do I have to tell you about Matthew's big sister Carol, who had been such a sweet child, but now went with a very different crowd in high school and came home with her nose pierced, then with metal things dangling from her lips. When I said something she just stuck out her tongue and there was what I can only describe as a penis-shaped cufflink screwed right through the middle of it. Tattoos followed, chains, leather, spikes, drugs, the foul language, and the enormous boyfriends who looked like killer androids out of some trash movie, who threatened to break my fucking back fucking in half if I ever laid a fucking hand on fucking Spike (which was what Carol called herself now) like, fuck, you know?

Her mother and I wept for her and at the same time were afraid of her and almost wished her dead, just so it would be over.

But it wasn't over, was it, Justin? Just one more turn of the fucking screw, like, you know, when business failed, even in these prosperous times and we had to sell the house, and daughter Carol flipped us the bird one last time and vanished on the back of a motorcycle. And then there

was the small matter of Melanie coming down with lymph cancer at a statistically unlikely, early age; which metastasized; and on the night when she died, when I sat for hours by her bedside in the hospital and held her hand and whispered little stupid nothings that she couldn't hear anyway; on that night of all nights I fell asleep, finally, out of sheer exhaustion, and dreamed for the first time in a very long time of deep spaces and dark planets.

I dreamed that I was hanging naked, like a trapped insect amid the frozen spiderwebworks of the Gardens of Ynath, beneath the brilliant stars in a black sky. And I heard the whispers of many voices, of those hanging there with me, frozen forever, suspended against time until the ultimate ending of the universe, and I conversed long and profoundly with a pharaoh of ancient Egypt, who had found his way hence 4,000 years ago, and with an artisan and scientist of medieval Italy who had delved into forbidden mysteries and contrived to be carried off one step ahead of the Inquisition; and I spoke too, with a member of the beetle race which will succeed mankind on the Earth 2,000,000 years hence, and with minds which had never known or imagined our species at all.

For in the Gardens of Ynath there is no time, and the future is as negligible as the past.

I dreamed of all those minds and voices, and it seemed, in my dream, that all of them were glorious and transfigured and greatly expectant; and also, I think, in part, afraid, of the one who is to come at the end of time, who was described to me in a manner I couldn't quite understand as the Darkness (or Chaos) that walks like a man, before whose feet we shall all, in the end, fall down in abject worship.

Such was my dream, and when I awoke alarms were going off and all the TV monitors around Melanie's bed had flatlined and the nurse hauled me aside to make room for frantic doctors and their useless ministrations.

I almost felt that you were with me in the room, Justin, and I cannot believe it was a coincidence that I reached into my pocket and took out your postcard, and read the address: a rural route, familiar zip code, the old Akeley place. I think you were there. I think you guided me as I walked out of the hospital unchallenged, as if I were invisible, and looked up into the bright New York sky and saw, hovering above the parking lot, one of the Outer Ones, like a crab or a jellyfish with membranous wings, waiting, visible for just a short time before it faded into the glare of the city lights.

We sat by candlelight at the table inside the old farmhouse, and you said to me, "It's all lies, Opie. Crap."

You wept then, and I looked at you with terror and amazement.

"No," I said. "You can't mean that."

"I mean all this messianic garbage, the idea that They were watching over us and guiding us and would take the faithful few off to the Gardens of Ynath to dwell in glory and wisdom forever –"

"I know," I said. "I read your book."

"All crap."

"Well what is the truth then?"

"This."

And you showed it to me. You reached under the table and lifted up something heavy, then thumped it down in front of me, the black stone, square, about the size and weight of a bowling ball, covered on all its surfaces with very worn, hieroglyphic writing. When I saw it, when I ran my hands over it, I knew that it had not been manufactured on this planet, and I knew, too, what it was; for I had seen such things in my dreams.

In the Gardens of Ynath there is a great altar of pale, powdery stone, with many niches in it, where such objects are placed, and some of those niches are empty.

"It's all too absurd," you said. There were tears on your face, gleaming in the candlelight. You looked very old then, exhausted, defeated. "The purpose of this entire exercise, the reason for the manipulation and ruin of generations of human lives, was not to uplift the human race with any goddamn cosmic message or to reward any faithful believers, but simply to *recover this stone*. It is one of five brought to Earth millions of years ago. One was recovered in Wales in the late 19th century. All of the others have storied histories. This one was found, and lost again, in the 1920s. I can't give you all the details. I don't know them. There was a lot of intrigue, subterfuge, something about a fake being sent away by rail freight, intercepted as it was supposed to be, a decoy... I don't even know why they want it. For reasons they've never bothered to tell us. Shit... They went through such trouble for decades at a time, when all this while, the fucking thing was buried under the floorboards of this farmhouse. Old Man Akeley fooled them, recovered it, or never lost it, and stashed it... Somehow they never figured it out. That was his last victory over them, before... whatever happened to him. Well, the only thing that makes any sense, when you think about it, is that the Outer Ones are just as stupid as we are."

"No," I said quietly. "For once I must tell you that you've got it all wrong. For once, at last, I am the master and you are the acolyte."

You merely turned to me in a daze and said, "What?" or maybe it was "Huh?" before I hefted the black stone and brained you with it.

I did so because I understood what you could not, that it isn't a matter of messiahs or movements or even of serving them in some semi-intelligent way. It's about joining the flea circus. They carried you off, because you promised them the black stone. But you did not have it, so they brought you back, to complete your trick. Now you have. That stone is a ticket to the Beyond. Not out of gratitude will they bear the bearer of the stone off with them, but for reasons of their own. It is not the faithful who shall be transported, but whoever holds the ticket, that's all.

Me. You brought me to this point. It is only logical that I should go.

After I struck you, I stood over you, and though you lay in a puddle of your own blood, I was not convinced that I had killed you.

I say that you will rise again, awaken out of your long dream and find me gone. But, being as I am such a nor-

mal fellow, a paragon of business-like efficiency, I conveniently have in my pocket a palmtop computer, into which I type this account, this imagining, for your benefit. I leave it here on the tabletop, for you to read when you've sufficiently recovered.

Because we were friends once. Because I want you to understand.

Now an absurd image comes: the stars are swirling like the water down a bathtub drain; no, like a vast cyclone stretching over lightyears of space and aeons of time, and the great numbers of the winged ones are like gnats, like mayflies, swarming into that brilliant abyss, into the mouth of eternity, which shall swallow up the bearer and the stone together; and I shall dwell without pain in the Gardens of Ynath amid my companions, until the ending of time, when the Crawling Chaos takes shape and walks like a man. Then shall I fall down at his feet and worship, and, like an animal, reach up to lick his outstretched hands.

That's what you wanted in the end, isn't it?

Darrell Schweitzer's last story here was "The Fire Eggs" (issue 153), which was reprinted in one of the year's-best anthologies. Born in 1952, and a resident of Pennsylvania, he has worked as a literary agent and is co-editor with George Scithers of the small-press magazine *Weird Tales*. He has also written many books — novels, short-story collections, poetry and non-fiction.

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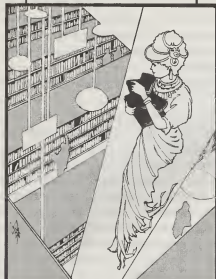
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## REVIEWED

## A Motley Crew

Liz Williams

Alastair Reynolds's *Diamond Dogs* (PS Publishing, £8) kicks off in Chasm City, where a man named Roland Childe is planning an expedition to a very dark tower indeed: a vast spire on a world named Golgotha, marked by the fragmented pieces of previous expedition members. Childe recruits a motley crew to help him in his exploration of the spire: his old friend and adversary Richard Swift; the sinister Dr Trintignant; Ultra captain Forqueray and two women, Celestine and Hirz. Together, they travel to Golgotha, and begin a bloody exploration of the spire.

Reynolds's novella is written with admirable economy and typical panache, with enough detail in the first few chapters to give us a real sense of the steampunk *noir* atmosphere of Chasm City. I confess that I enjoyed these opening scenes, with their futuristic Gothic ambience, more than the subsequent chapters, when the crew begin their exploration of the spire itself. The tower contains games and puzzles, and the failure to solve them results in a macabre series of punishments, but I did not feel that Reynolds is entirely successful in invoking the nightmare qualities of the spire. The environment is a bit too reminiscent of the Cube, in the film of the same name, and I was not sufficiently engaged with the characters to really care what happened to them. They are stylish, but – with the possible exception of Trintignant – superficial, and I found it difficult to empathize with Childe and Swift who are, basically, wealthy men still scoring off one another in the trying manner of the alumni of lesser public schools. I was intrigued by the enigmatic Forqueray, but did not, alas, find out any more about him. I also did not feel that

the title, with its obvious reference to David Bowie, really added anything to the mythos of the story. It's possible to read it as a metaphorical descent into Hell (and there's at least one reference to German romantic painting which would seem to sustain this view), but if this is the author's intention, the conceit isn't carried through with enough resonance for it to work.

*Diamond Dogs* is an interesting addition to Reynolds's work, but it lacks the depth and scope of either the main novels or some of this writer's impressive short fiction, and I wouldn't recommend it as the best place to start.

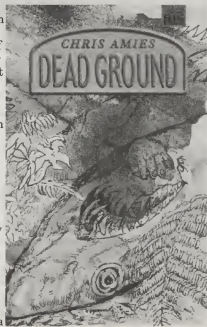
A recent release from Big Engine continues to demonstrate the diversity of this new publisher's list – *Dead Ground* by Chris Amies (Big Engine, £8.99). It's an "expedition" novel, set in the South Seas in the 1930s, with overtones of Lovecraft as well as *The Boy's Own Paper*. I must confess that, despite having enjoyed Amies's stories in the past, I did not expect to be so taken with his debut novel: the Pacific islands are not a region in which I have a great interest, and I'm not wild about this kind of genre anyway. But I found myself unexpectedly gripped by this book.

The story begins with an archaeological expedition to the Condals, a small group of South Pacific islands. Head of the expedition is Cosima

Garton, a brusque, no-nonsense daughter of the British Empire and the kind of person who gave the Brits a bad name from one side of the globe to the other. That Garton is a woman working in what was very much a man's world renders her slightly more sympathetic, but only slightly. But Garton isn't the villain in this novel: that honour goes to something much older and nastier, the shark deity Kawehe who, like Lord Voldemort, must not be named, and whose inimical presence is kept at bay by the presence of the island's sinister statues.

Soon after the expedition arrives on the main island, the place is plunged into turmoil by the murder of a respected local man, the poet Tolu Marangi. His skull has been split open, so that his spirit can no longer be contained in its housing, but must wander the world as a ghost. His daughter Ata and archaeologist Allan attempt to find the culprit, aided by the world-weary British commissioner Willerby, who until now has been principally preoccupied with taking opium and seducing local youths (why don't we have this sort of job any more?). Gradually, more deaths come to light in spite of the islanders' efforts to find the murderer – and even more disquietingly, the islanders themselves are beginning to change, growing sharp teeth and developing a lust for extreme violence. The island descends into chaos and gore as the influence of Kawehe grows stronger, and in the end it's up to an alliance of archaeologists and islanders to save the day. They are aided in their efforts by an unlikely avatar of the god Roho: a Scottish doctor named Shand (a part written for Robbie Coltrane if he ever gets tired of playing Hagrid).

This is a pacy, well-written novel with a commendable lack of padding. The characters, while 1930s stereotypes to some degree, are written with a late-20th century sensibility and do not descend into caricature. Even Garton has her sympathetic moments and people are portrayed as complex beings with their own agendas – particularly Marangi's daughter Ata who initially seemed the least finely drawn. It's a ripping yarn with a modern twist:





ideal reading on a wet Sunday afternoon if you can't make it all the way to the South Seas.

Over the last few decades, a small but discernible tradition has started to develop: heroes of American sf and fantasy who bear the names of US states. Herbert's Duncan Idaho, Indiana Jones, and now Ukiah Oregon – in *Alien Taste* by debut novelist Wen Spencer (Roc, \$6.99). Such names place their bearers in a particular landscape and setting and evoke a certain spirit: a frontiersmanship, a quiet reliability, an understated, even ironic, heroism.

Ukiah Oregon is no exception to this archetype. He is a young man, quiet and somewhat ill at ease with the urban setting in which he finds himself. Based in Pittsburgh when the story begins, Ukiah comes from very different circumstances: raised by a wolf pack, he has abilities which ordinary humans do not have. He possesses an eidetic memory, an enhanced sense of taste and smell – qualities which make him an ideal tracker, a hunter of lost souls. Ukiah's adolescence has been spent with Jo, the woman who found him, and her partner Lara, but this is no tame, timid cub. Ukiah is full of questions – about his origins, about his nature, and about his role in the world. When the novel begins, these questions are about to be given some harsh answers. Brought in to find the whereabouts of the apparent victim of a brutal set of murders, Ukiah and his PI partner Max find themselves facing a vicious outlaw gang that the FBI calls the Pack.

Ukiah's search for the Pack and their sworn enemies, a hyper-violent group known as the Ontogard, occupies the first third of the book. The action swings between this dangerous hunt and Ukiah's relatively tranquil home life, set against the slightly futuristic background of an America obsessed with the latest Mars landing. Gradually, as Ukiah becomes more directly acquainted with the Pack, he learns more about his origins and himself.

At first, due to the wolf references and the nomenclature of the gangs, I was under the impression that this was a werewolf story. And in a way, it is, just as it is also a story about a young man's coming of age – but it's also something much more complex and interesting than that. I'm reluctant to say any more about it, as this novel has an intricate and rewarding plot.

Minor problems are the title, which I don't like, and I also got the impression that the professions of some of the characters (Lara's job at the local observatory, for instance) had been shoe-horned around the demands of the plot. However, Spencer's prose is workmanlike, reading like a more tra-

ditional private-eye novel than contemporary sf (and there's nothing wrong with that) and the characters are engaging. Ukiah in particular is a sympathetic protagonist, reminding me rather of *Kung Fu*'s Grasshopper.

If you enjoy werewolf stories, you'll certainly like this novel, and if you're also a fan of *The X-Files* (which shares *Alien Taste*'s down-beat atmosphere) you'll enjoy it even more. Wen Spencer has a sequel on the way and I'll be looking out for it.

In *The Crow Maiden* by Sarah Singleton (Cosmos Books, \$15) Katharine Matravers, the young wife of a local road-protester, takes her baby daughter Niamh into the Wiltshire countryside one summer evening for some peace and quiet. She meets a strange young woman living in a bender beside Swallowhead Spring. Next morning, after a night of wandering, Katherine returns home, but Niamh seems oddly changed: she has acquired a foul and ineradicable smell. Katherine's husband Paul is visited by a simulacrum of his wife and these are not the only odd things occurring in the neighbourhood. A curious band of people turn up, ostensibly to join the local road-protesters – but their clothes and appearance are strange, and no one seems to know where they come from. Gradually, the road-protestors and Katharine become drawn into an eerie twilight state in which the boundaries between the real world and a dangerous, shifting faeryland become blurred and indistinct.

If I had to pin a label on this debut novel, I'd describe it as neo-romantic. It is, in essence, pagan, firmly situated in landscape and local mythology, and its roots can be traced as far back as the work of people like Arthur Machen and John Cowper Powys. It has a powerful sense of place (anyone who is interested in the English landscape novel should seek it out). Sarah Singleton's take on faeryland is particularly reminiscent of Machen's depictions of an alluring, sinister, inhuman world that lies almost within reach of our own and that cannot be trusted. Katherine's visions are similar to hallucinogenic trips: she changes form, travels through a perceptual veil and by doing so, draws the two worlds more closely together. This intense, otherworldly vision, combined with

Singleton's powerful use of language, is the real strength of this novel. There are some extraordinary passages, containing an almost spell-like use of words. It is not a quick read, and this is to its credit.

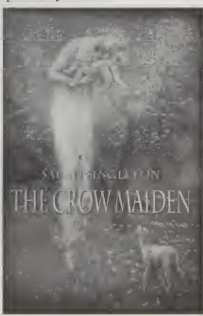
*The Crow Maiden* is also a modern novel, dealing with some very contemporary preoccupations. I would hazard a guess that Singleton's description of the road-protest movement is drawn from first-hand experience, and her knowledge of the pagan scene also has a ring of authenticity. She does not romanticize the protest movement itself: the miseries of squatting in pungent mud and relentless downpour, under a tarpaulin reeking of dope, are well observed. Her characters are convincing and well drawn: confused, passive Katherine develops considerably throughout the course of the novel and so does her relationship with her well-meaning, politically angst-ridden husband Paul. Not all the characters are so sympathetic: I'm afraid I particularly took against the grumpy, self-righteous child of nature Elaine. If I met her at a festival, I'd hide behind a tree.

The one major problem I had with the novel is the dialogue: I got the impression that Singleton has particular positions that she wants to convey, and has chosen the characters' discourse as the medium by which to accomplish this. People preach rather than converse, sometimes with little regard to context, and I found their conversations unconvincingly jarring at times. Singleton has many interesting ideas to express, but I would rather she had done this via the thoughts of her characters rather than their speech.

However, Singleton is to be congratulated in avoiding a classic trap. The spectre at this kind of literary feast is, of course, *Cold Comfort Farm*. Stella Gibbons has made it very difficult to write about alternative folk and faery

beliefs without a corresponding descent into parody (Gibbons's macramé-loving flower-child Elfine springs hideously to mind). *The Crow Maiden*, with its references to Morris Men and the summer solstice, successfully skirts this pitfall: largely because of the complexity of the characters and the author's very strong use of descriptive language. This is a most interesting novel and I hope it achieves the success it deserves.

Liz Williams



Early this year BBC Radio 4 listeners were treated to a series of *Chillers*, four half-hour adaptations of classic science-fiction stories dramatized by Mike Walker.

John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?" is very much a visually oriented story, and thus a rather odd choice to start the range. I am a great believer in experimenting with the audio medium – people should try the impossible once in a while to find out what really is impossible – but this has to count as a brave failure. Listening to it is like listening to a heavily abridged soundtrack of John Carpenter's *The Thing*, and where it works at all it works because it reminds the listener of that movie.

Harlan Ellison stars in the second *Chiller*, based on his own story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream." He gives a highly effective portrayal of the nasty computer AM (pronounced "Am") rather than "A.M.," I was surprised to note), while David Soul plays the narrator. One minor quibble: if you have no mouth, there has to be a better way of communicating the fact than simply announcing it in a muffled voice. Nevertheless this is appropriately chilling stuff.

Lucius Shepard's "Delta Sly Honey" is a Vietnam story about a radio operator who contacts a phantom squadron. In narrative terms I feel it runs out of steam about halfway through, but the palpable jungle atmosphere remains, partly due to Cory Johnson's gentle drawl as he narrates. Good use is also made of that handiest of all radio-play devices: an actual radio. A fictional radio can provide unobtrusive exposition, and its distorted sounds can be suitably eerie.

The final *Chiller*, "Corona" by Samuel R. Delany, is one of the finest pieces of sf audio I have ever heard. Set in a future in which the solar system is colonized, it's the tale of a very bright nine-year-old telepath who wants to kill herself, and a somewhat less bright ex-con who gives her life some hope. It's a lived-in future filled with beauty and brutality, tragedy and humanity, and for half an hour we get to live in it too. The sense of being there increases with repeated listenings.

Let's hope the BBC have plans to release these as a tape/CD set. Another series would be very welcome.

The latest audio-only release of a "lost" Doctor Who story is *The Faceless Ones* (2 CDs, 6 episodes, £13.99), starring Patrick Troughton and narrated by Frazer Hines. Set in (then) present-day Gatwick Airport and featuring the alien Chameleons, this will be welcomed by completists; unfortunately, unlike some of the recent Hartnell releases, the Troughtons don't generally work so well

## Silent Chill: Audio and Other Media

Paul Beardsley

without the visuals. They were made for TV when all's said and done – but it would be nice if the BBC could include a few more photographs from the stories in question rather than just a throw-together montage on the cover.

To see Troughton in his full black-and-white glory, I can heartily recommend *The Tomb of the Cybermen* which was recently re-released on DVD (4 episodes, £19.99). The story sees the TARDIS crew arrive on the planet Telos where a team of archaeologists have uncovered "the last resting place" of the Cybermen. Logic and credible character motivation is generally absent, but this hardly matters – the performances carry the story, and there are some extremely effective moments, such as the awakening of the Cybermen in their honeycomb chambers. Thanks to Steve Roberts' Restoration Team, the picture quality is much better than it was when *Tomb* was released on video ten years ago, and there's a whole host of goodies accompanying the main feature.

Still with the monochrome adventures, the rarely-shown Hartnell story *Planet of Giants* (3 episodes, £12.99) has been released on video. The TARDIS crew have been reduced to the size of insects – rather appropriately, given that the story was inspired by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. *Giants* has its fair share of delightful moments (notably when one character has to open a briefcase!) and demonstrates once again the programme's versatility and ability to work miracles on a tiny budget. It's also slightly surprising to find such a strongly-stated ecological theme in a TV drama first broadcast in 1964.

Less thrilling, alas, is the video release of *Underworld* (4 episodes, £12.99). Tom Baker is generally regarded as the definitive Doctor Who, and some of his stories were undoubtedly classics, but he was also saddled with a disproportionate number of best-forgotten adventures.

Baker's personality and Louise Jameson's cleavage are not enough to rescue this unengaging take on Greek Mythology in Space.

Big Finish continue to release "Bernice Summerfield" science-fiction audio adventures. The decline in quality seems to be accelerating, with the latest – *The Greatest Shop in the Galaxy* (1 CD, 1 hour, £9.99) – marking a new nadir for audio. Everything about it is dreadful, from the self-congratulatory blurb to the character who says "boing!" every couple of minutes.

If you happen to own a PlayStation2 and you're on the lookout for new forms of storytelling, you could do worse than invest in last year's Konami release *Silent Hill 2* (£44.99). Superficially it resembles games of the *Quake* ilk, in that you control a character (called James in this case) who wanders around a landscape picking up items, shooting monsters and solving puzzles. But these aspects are almost incidental. *Silent Hill 2* is a powerful psychological horror story, in which James travels to the Canadian town of Silent Hill to find out why his three-years-dead wife has apparently started writing him letters. Because it is interactive, it is often much more involving than a similar book or film could be, although it does contain echoes of many familiar works. Obvious examples include Romero's *Living Dead* series and much of David Lynch's work, notably *Blue Velvet* and *Eraserhead*. One might also add the works of Ramsey Campbell, Clive Barker, Delany's *Dhalgren*, and – if the debate it has provoked is anything to go by – *The Prisoner*.

Visually *Silent Hill 2* benefits from a superb standard of graphics, typified by repellent yet compelling images of squalor, of almost-human monsters half-seen in the ever-present mist, of awkward camera angles and grainy video memory sequences. Equally important is the soundtrack which is sometimes a soothing melody and sometimes a nerve-jangling metallic cacophony which heightens the sense of panic. The fear one experiences when playing the game has little to do with gore (although gore does play a part); rather, it is about dread. James is not the only one confronting his demons in the town of Silent Hill, and stumbling upon the truth about the other characters can be more disturbing than having a monster leap out at you.

With its twisted logic and startlingly adult subject matter, *Silent Hill 2* heralds a new level of maturity and imagination in computer gaming. I'm betting that this will be talked about in years to come, when everyone has a system to play it on.

Paul Beardsley

John Crowley's *Egypt* series forms a cross-roads between what the world is, and what we'd like it to be. *Dæmonomania* (Bantam, \$13.95, trade paperback) is the third part of an immense, often baffling story concerning the time of passage between the dissolution of one world and the formation of another. During the passage time, individuals who can recognize the signs of change have the opportunity to choose what type of world they shall end up living in, and the *Egypt* series concerns their struggles to determine what kind of world this will be.

The novel is set in two different times. In 16th-century Europe, Giordano Bruno flees the Inquisition to spread his heretical ideas concerning the plurality of worlds. Meanwhile, the Elizabethan alchemist John Dee converses with a boy who believes himself to be a werewolf fated to protect the harvest from witches. In 1970s America, Rosie Rasmussen struggles to retain custody of her epileptic daughter from her ex-husband and cult member, Mike Mucho. At the same time, Pierce Moffat, an historian, would-be writer and inadvertent magician, loses his lover, Rose Ryder, to the same group.

The events in the 1580s and 1970s seem linked in various and subtle ways, possibly because both are times of passage. The 16th-century strand is apparently the invention of the dead Catskills writer Fellowes Kraft, whose unfinished novel about Bruno and Dee is discovered by Pierce. We cannot, however, be sure that the events Kraft writes about are entirely "fictional." At one point, Rosie's daughter, Sam, peers into a crystal ball. Centuries away, John Dee looks into the same glass, and sees her looking back at him. At the beginning of *Love & Sleep*, we learn that as children Pierce and his cousins took in and sheltered another little girl named Bobby Shaftoe, who was running from her grandfather. Floyd Shaftoe turns out to be a strange, lonely man driven by a strange, apocalyptic, theology. As the story progresses, it is revealed that Bobby and her grandfather may be another pairing of witch and werewolf, a couple always in conflict, yet eternally bound together.

The main conceit of the sequence, that "once the world was not as it has since become," is expressed most explicitly through the musings of Pierce Moffat, who is trying to write a book based on the premise. He speculates, for instance, that alchemists could once *really* make gold, that astrology actually worked, and that one could achieve changes in the universe simply by re-ordering an image of the universe in one's head. But once the (subtly) new uni-

verse is born, it is as if the old universe was never there; alchemy was always impossible and astrology was always nonsense. After the passage time, only secret signs of the old world's existence remain, visible only to the initiated. The irony is that Pierce, a sceptic, does not believe this conceit, even though he may be an (inadvertent) initiate to its truth.

In *Love & Sleep*, Pierce seduced Rose Ryder by semi-magical means, and they pursue a strange, sado-masochistic relationship which is still progressing at the start of the third novel. This relationship is swiftly broken by Rose's initiation into Powerhouse International and when Pierce tries to argue with her, he is warned off by a contingent of the group.

At the same time, Mike Mucho wants custody of his epileptic daughter whom he believes is subject to possession. Meanwhile, Bobby, now adult and also a Powerhouse member, seeks dominion over her grandfather. Thus, again unwittingly, the "invisible college" of Pierce, Rosie Rasmussen and mystic Beau Brachman finds itself in conflict with the Christian Powerhouse.

Both these storylines converge at a fancy-dress party organized by Rosie where guests are invited to "come as you're not." Pierce's relationship with Rose is finally concluded, and he (possibly) meets the deceased Fellowes Kraft. Kraft, speaking to Pierce about his unfinished novel, notes that:

"I failed. Yes, I think that's evident now... The conception was just too huge, the parts too many..." To which Pierce replies: "It's a corrupted text... I believe." So we are brought face to face with the final, startling, secret of *Egypt*: all the events depicted are somehow fictions. This is something we, as readers, know already, but it is also something which the characters could – or should – never really know. It is almost as if Crowley himself has injected himself into his own novel to comment upon its progress. Numerous games have been played to their conclusions, and Pierce can only deduce that they are fictions, and flawed ones, at that.

The party is also the place that Beau Brachman rallies a defeated Rosie Rasmussen and pledges to snatch her daughter from the clutches of the Powerhouse. The rescue itself forms the climax of the book, as Brachman and the cult leader Honeybeare fight their final, mystical battle. Rosie, meanwhile, spirits her daughter away from under her husband's nose.

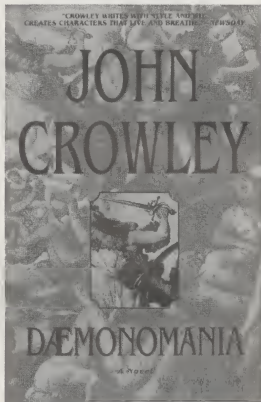
The *Egypt* books are vast, labyrinthine and strange, and form a work that Crowley himself admits is only marginally science fiction or fantasy. The novel's tone seems to have more in common with the magical realism of writers like John Updike or Jonathan Carroll, than much that is called sf or fantasy.

It must be said that the long delays between the novels, coupled with the limited availability of the earlier volumes, have muted the power of the series (*Egypt* came out in 1987, *Love & Sleep* in 1994, and *Dæmonomania* in 2001). The long waiting period between volumes is perhaps one reason why his work has never sold as well as it could. However, those with the stamina to seek out and read this series will find themselves rewarded. The *Egypt* series is a work to vanish into, to become spellbound by, and remember as one might a dream.

Matt Colborn

## Age of Aquarius?

Matt Colborn



Isaac Asimov's Foundation Saga, a series of seven novels published between 1951 and 1993, spawned the Second Foundation Trilogy in the late 1990s. These books, written after Asimov died in 1992, were worthy successors to the series and penned by science-fiction luminaries Gregory Benford, Greg Bear and David Brin (see my reviews in *Interzone* 123, 138 and 149). Among the "Asimov experts" acknowledged as advisers for these books was Donald Kingsbury. Now we have *Psychohistorical Crisis* (Tor \$27.95), a novel written by Kingsbury himself, expanded from a shorter tale of the same title he wrote for Greg Benford's *Far Futures* anthology (1997).

Donald Kingsbury has not been a prolific author of sf since his initial publication in 1952 in *Asiomatic* magazine (where Asimov's own Foundation tales had first appeared), but his new novel attempts to make up for the paucity of his production rate, coming in at nearly 500 pages of densely written prose. In addition, we are treated to an exhaustive appendix explaining how "Galactic Time" differs from "Archaic Earth Time," an appendix on Roman measures and pendulums, and – of course – the obligatory timeline of his take on Asimov's creation.

*Mental chewing-gum* was my first impression. As for the story itself, it induced a strange, dislocated feeling in this Asimovian reader. Kingsbury has closely followed Asimov's Foundation timeline, but he uses different names and terms for the familiar Asimov characters and planets. Hari Seldon becomes The Founder, the planet Terminus becomes Faraway, the planet Trantor becomes Splendid Wisdom. Whether due to copyright reasons – this isn't an official Foundation book, after all – or whether Kingsbury wished to stamp his own identity on Asimov's world in this manner, the reader begins this novel like a swimmer paddling through well-known waters, then finding the footholds have changed; destinations aren't quite what's expected, yet are familiar enough to disconcert, to generate a sense of unease, not homecoming.

For a while, I entertained an alternative-universe theory... this was a Foundation book set in a might-have-been world. The evidence seemed clear in the text. Kingsbury has set his story during the time of the Second Empire the one never actually covered in all the previous Foundation books. Asimov's stories concentrated on the Foundation's strivings to become the seed of that Second Galactic Empire – the Second Foundation Trilogy explored that theme further – and Kingsbury's novel attempts to show it in actuality: an Empire run under the

## All Psyched Up

Nigel Brown

principles of psychohistory (psychohistory is Asimov's imaginary science of predicting social futures using mathematics). This new novel therefore takes us deep into the messianic age striven for in the previous ten books of the saga, but as the Chinese proverb warns, perhaps we should be careful what we wish for...

A closer look at Kingsbury's timeline, a back-of-the-envelope calculation, and at last things fell into place. This novel is set over 2,000 years after the end of all the previous Foundation books; time enough for names to change, facts to be forgotten or misremembered.

Isn't suspension of disbelief wonderful?

The story itself focuses on the career of a young aspirant to psychohistory. We meet his mentor – who happens to be the second most powerful psychohistorian in the Empire – and we discover a flaw in Seldon's Plan that Kingsbury seeks to expand upon: for psychohistory to work the population itself must have no knowledge of this predictive science, otherwise random social currents cease to be truly random and the predictive power of psychohistory fails. In this novel, after

1,600 years of psychohistory's Empire, attempting to keep the mathematical secrets of psychohistory is becoming impossible; the end is in sight – this is the Crisis alluded to in the title. The novel hangs on the young psychohistorian's struggles to first become a member of this mathematical elite, then to cope with this realization that the crisis has arrived, despite the denials of the psychohistorical establishment.

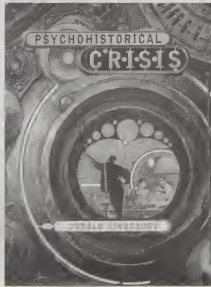
When the background to a story is complex (as it is here, with thousands of years of back-story, and ten books before it), it is wise to keep the structure of the storyline as simple as possible. Kingsbury fails this clarity test by initially switching the story backwards and forwards in narrative time in a misplaced effort to raise dramatic tension. It's therefore difficult to get one's bearings at the start of this book. Once this is achieved, however, the effort is worthwhile.

He won me over. Although lacking Asimov's skills in writing clear prose (admirably emulated by Benford, Bear and Brin), Kingsbury has constructed a well-thought-out addition to the canon. Particularly enjoyable is his inclusion into the world of psychohistory of "the Fam." This artificial implant, which boosts the brainpower of an individual, makes for interesting consequences in a world where artificially enhanced mathematical aptitude brings real political power. He also has fun with the 761st century's view of our present times. I won't spoil the surprises, except to tease with the image of a fossilized Flying Fortress being excavated by incredulous archaeologists.

Before *Psychohistorical Crisis*, Asimov's own *Foundation and Earth* (1986) was the book which had taken the reader furthest into the future of the Foundation and psychohistory. Just before he died, Asimov wrote in *I. Asimov: A Memoir* (1994) "... in *Foundation and Earth*... there were complications existing... and I had no idea how these complications could be handled. I still don't know, though five years have passed since I finished the novel." Asimov never thought his way out of those complications, but, sadly, neither has Kingsbury. *Psychohistorical Crisis* is set so far into the future that Kingsbury has simply ignored the loose ends left by the Good Doctor.

A clever thing for him to do, if that allows him to write on this subject without being tied down by Asimov's plotting. This does leave the Asimovian reader unsatisfied, however. There's plenty of room to spare in 2,000 years of Galactic History for the questions posed at the end of *Foundation and Earth* to be answered. I hope we'll see someone produce that work one day, though I won't predict it will happen.

Nigel Brown





This is a list of all *sf*, *fantasy* and *horror* titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alkon, Paul K. **Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology**. "Genres in Context." Routledge, ISBN 0-415-93887-2, xix+176pp, trade paperback, no price shown. (Critical study of 19th-century *sf*, first published in the USA, 1994; although it's eight years old [originally issued in hardcover by Twayne Publishers of New York], we haven't seen this book before now but have heard good reports of it: certainly, Professor Alkon's earlier book, *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* [University of Georgia Press, 1987], was a fine academic study of its subject, so this one, although apparently more general and "popular" in its approach to early *sf*, should be well worth reading too.) No date shown: received in February 2002.

Asher, Neal. **Gridlinked**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-48433-8, 522pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; another British small-press writer makes good, and has now been relaunched as a "big-press" author by Macmillan and Pan Books.) 22nd March 2002.

Broderick, Damien. **Transcension**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30369-8, 348pp, hardcover, cover by David Seeley, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; in which Australian writer Broderick "brings to life one of the high-tech futures he imagined in [his non-fiction book] *The Spike* [2001], a 22nd-century utopia pervaded by nano-technology and ruled by a benign but coldly objective AI"; Vernor Vinge's notion of the coming technological "Singularity" in human affairs seems to play a key part in Broderick's thinking; recommended to those who are prepared for some serious brain-bruising.) 27th February 2002.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **The Warrior's Apprentice**. Foreword by Douglas Muir. Genealogy by Suford Lewis. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 1-886778-27-2, 309pp, hardcover, cover by Nicholas Jainschigg, \$25. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; a "newly copyedited and emended" hardcover reissue of one of Bujold's early "Miles Vorkosigan" novels, previously published only as a paperback original [and, perhaps, as part of a book-club omnibus – which we presume is what NESFA mean when they describe this edition as the first "generally available" hardcover].) February 2002.

Bulis, Christopher. **Palace of the Red Sun**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-33849-X, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Sixth Doctor and Peri.) March 2002.

Butler, Chris. **Any Time Now**. Cosmos Books [PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, USA], ISBN 1-58715-328-9, 161pp, trade paperback, \$15 [USA], £12 [UK]. (Sf novel, first edition; this

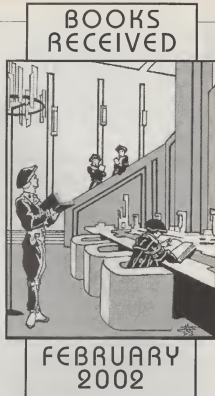
is a debut book [or so we believe] by a British writer who has previously published short stories in the small press; it seems to involve time travel; to order, see the website: [www.cosmos-books.com](http://www.cosmos-books.com); Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher which has now released a large number of titles – although we have seen few of them; the Cosmos side of the operation, edited by Sean Wallace, specializes in British authors, and has announced new novels by Barrington J. Bayley, Keith Brooke and Brian Stableford, among others.) Late entry: 2001 publication, received in February 2002.

Carey, Jacqueline. **Kushiel's Chosen**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87239-9, 700pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; another bonecrusher of a Big Commercial Fantasy by one of the newer American writers, it's described as a "powerfully erotic.") April 2002.

Clarke, Arthur C. **A Fall of Moondust**. "SF Masterworks, 49." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07317-9, 224pp, B-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1961; Clarke's well-known, claustrophobic, hard-science thriller; it contains a preface by the author dated 24 August 1986.) 14th March 2002.

Craig, Brian. **Zarago: The First Tale of Orfeo**. "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-85154-231-8, 250pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1989; "Brian Craig" is a pseudonym of Brian Stableford; as with earlier reprints of the older novels in this GW series, the text has been re-set in its entirety [single quote marks, where originally there were double – and other such clues], so it may be that it has also been revised somewhat.) March 2002.

Farris, John. **The Fury and the Terror**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-34157-3, 504pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a belated sequel to the author's best-



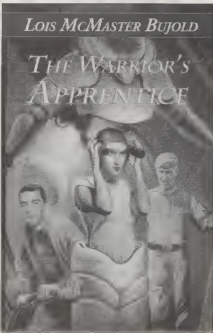
known book, *The Fury* [1976], it seems to be about a telepath who foresees a terrorist plot to crash an airliner into something-or-other; the hardcover first edition appeared in April 2001 – hmmm!) February 2002.

Ferring, David. **Shadowbreed: Book 2 of the Konrad Trilogy**. "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-208-3, 242pp, A-format paperback, cover by Karl Kopinski, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1990; "David Ferring" is a pseudonym of David Garrett.) February 2002.

Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. **Effendi: The Second Arabesque**. Earthlight, 0-743-20285-6, 376pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *Pashazade*, in the "Arabesque" trilogy, set in a timeline where Germany won the First World War and where the Middle East is still dominated by the Ottoman Empire.) 2nd April 2002.

Hobb, Robin. **Fool's Errand: The Tawny Man**, I. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711056-1, 584pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym of Megan Lindholm.) 4th March 2002.

Hoffman, Nina Kiriki. **Past the Size of Dreaming**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00898-4, 342pp, trade paperback, cover by Tim Barrall, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a follow-up to the author's World Fantasy Award-nominated *A Red Heart of Memories* [1999], featuring the same witch heroine, Matt Black; it's in the attractive small, squarish format which this publisher often favours.) March 2002.







Holt, Tom. **The Second Tom Holt Omnibus**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-133-0, \$66pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Lee, £7.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; the two novels it contains –

*Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* and *My Hero* – were first published in the UK in 1988 and 1996.) 7th March 2002.

Huff, Tanya. **The Better Part of Valor**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0062-7, 411pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, \$6.99. (SF novel, first edition; second in a new series of space operas [with a female hero, natch] by a Canadian author hitherto best known for her fantasies and vampire novels; the first book, which we didn't see, was called *Valor's Choice*.) March 2002.

Hunter, Kim. **Wizard's Funeral: Book Two of the Red Pavilions**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-097-0, 343pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the publishers still tell us nothing about the author.) 7th March 2002.

Jacques, Brian. **Castaways of the Flying Dutchman**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00914-X, \$36pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Koelsch, \$6.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the UK and the USA, 2001; the author takes a break from his usual "Redwall" series of animal fantasies to write a ripping yarn about a boy, his dog, and the most famous ghost-ship in seafaring legend; Jacques is one of those writers [like Peter Dickinson] who is more highly valued in the USA than in his native UK, and although this one probably appeared in Britain as a mere "kids' book" [we didn't see it] it is here slanted by its US paperback publishers towards a more adult readership.) March 2002.

King, Stephen. **Everything's Eventual: 14 Dark Tales**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-77073-2, xvi+416pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 2002; 14 short stories, four of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, plus a new introduction by the writer billed as "one of the great storytellers of our time.") 19th March 2002.

King, William. **Grey Hunter: "A Warhammer 40,000 Novel. A Space Wolf Novel."** Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-207-5, 276pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Dainton, £5.99. (SF/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; third in the "Space Wolf" sub-series set in the far-future universe of the dark-hued "Warhammer 40K" game; William King [born 1959] is an erstwhile *Interzone* contributor.) February 2002.

Levinson, Paul. **The Consciousness Plague**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30098-2, 316pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (SF novel, first edition; a follow-up to the author's first book, *The Silk Code* [1999], also featuring his scientific detective Phil D'Amato; in this case, the hero's task is nothing less than "saving the human memory from extinction.") 13th March 2002.

Lindholm, Megan. **The Windsingers**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711253-X, 392pp, A-format paper-

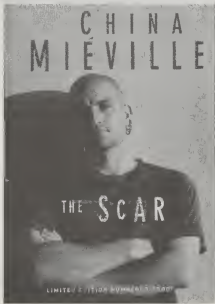
back, cover by Paul Gregory, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; follow-up to *Harpy's Flight* in the "Ki and Vandien Quartet"; the cover describes the author as "Megan Lindholm... WHO ALSO WRITES AS ROBIN HOBB.") 18th March 2002.

McDonald, Ian. **Ares Express**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03754-4, 553pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £7.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 2001; Simon & Schuster/Earthlight somehow overlooked sending us a hardcover review copy of this one last year [but see the interview with the author in *Interzone* 172]; set on Mars, it's a belated sequel to McDonald's first novel, *Desolation Road* [1988].) 4th March 2002.

Mackey, Douglas A. **Weird Scenes Inside the Gokmind**. Qubik Books [407 Highland St., Fairfield, IA 52556, USA], ISBN 1-58898-568-7, 313pp, trade paperback, \$15. (SF novel, first edition; this self-published item is a debut novel by an American writer already known for several non-fiction books; Ian Watson commends it: "Doug Mackey is a genuine free spirit... If Philip K. Dick and Rudy Rucker turn you on, read this now"; to order, see the website: [www.qubik-books.com](http://www.qubik-books.com).) Late entry: December 2001 publication, received in February 2002.

Marco, John. **The Eyes of God**. "The enthralling new fantasy from the author of *Tyrants and Kings*." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07364-0, 789pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £18.99 [not seen]; the beginning of a new series of Big Commercial Fantasies by this DAW Books author.) 21st March 2002.

Marco, John. **The Saints of the Sword**. "Book Three of *Tyrants and Kings*." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07290-3, 752pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the conclusion of the "epic military fantasy" trilogy which began with *The Jackal of War* [1999] and *The Grand Design* [2000].) 14th March 2002.



Miéville, China. **The Scar**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-78174-0, 717pp, hardcover, £17.99. (SF/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's third novel, following the widely-praised *King Rat* [1998] and *Perdido Street Station* [2000], it's described as being about a "search for the island of a forgotten people, for the most astonishing beast in the seas, and ultimately for a fabled place – a massive wound in reality, a source of unthinkable power and danger.") 26th April 2002.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Shadowings: A Spellsong Cycle Novel**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30358-2, 496pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; fifth and last in its series; the front cover clearly states that this is "the final novel of the Spellsong Cycle.") 28th February 2002.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Remnant Population**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-136-5, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this appears to be the first UK edition of a six-year-old standalone space adventure by the author of the seven-volume "Sereno Legacy" space-opera series.) 7th March 2002.

Mór, Caiséal. **Carolan's Concerto: A Toast to the Three Sacred Pastimes of Old Ireland: Music, Storytelling and Whiskey**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-2901-X, 491pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; a "joyous romp," which is inevitably "rollicking" and of course "Irish," it's by an Australian author.) 4th February 2002.

Morris, Jonathan. **Anachrophobia**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53847-3, 277pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (SF TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) March 2002.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **The Years of Rice and Salt**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224679-1, 669pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Alternate-history SF novel, first edition; set in the present, but in a timeline where the Black Death of the 1340s succeeded in wiping out 99% of Europeans, thus removing them from history, this big book is being promoted as "the most ambitious alternate history novel ever written"; certainly, it seems timely in that it depicts [in part] a Muslim-dominated world – and of course it was planned and written before the events of September 2001, which served to sharpen many people's awareness of such historical alternatives; reportedly, the author's working title was "A World Without Europe"; given the events of last year, and given the desirability of appealing to a broad audience, maybe it would have been better if he had stuck with that; as it is, the existing title has a ring reminiscent of David Wingrove's superficially similar "Chung Kuo" novels, one of which was called *Days of Bitter Strength*.) 4th March 2002.

Russell, Sean. **The One Kingdom: Book One of The Swans' War**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-088-1, 698pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; a Big Commercial Fantasy, it represents a first British appearance for this pop-

interzone

ular Canadian writer [born 1952] – who should not be confused with his highly-praised compatriot Sean Stewart [who still awaits UK publication, so far as we know.] 7th March 2002.

Smith, Clark Ashton. **The Emperor of Dreams: The Lost Worlds of Clark Ashton Smith.** Edited by Stephen Jones. "Fantasy Masterworks, 26." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07373-X, \$80pp, B-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £7.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition in this form; claiming to be the first volume "ever to encompass Clark Ashton Smith's entire career as a writer," it consists of over 40 stories and some poems, all culled from earlier Smith collections and chapbooks, together with a 24-page afterword by editor Steve Jones which gives an account the reclusive American author's life [1893-1961].) 14th March 2002.

Stableford, Brian. **Dark Ararat.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30168-7, 352pp, hardcover, cover by Alan Pollack, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; fifth in the loose series of very imaginative biotech novels Stableford has been writing for Tor Books, following *Inherit the Earth* [1998], *Architects of Emortality* [1999], *The Fountains of Youth* [2000 – described by the *New York Times* as "cerebral science fiction of a high order"] and *The Cassandra Complex* [2001]; in this one, "hundreds of years in our future, humanity is expanding out into the galaxy in gigantic colony ships.") 27th March 2002.

Stone, Dave. **Citadel of Dreams.** Foreword by Andrew Cartmel. Frontispiece by Lee Sullivan. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9J], 1-903889-05-7, 107pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf TV spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous "standard edition" [hardcover] priced at £10 [not seen]; the limited "deluxe edition" which the publishers have been kind enough to send as a review copy is nicely produced and is signed by author, illustrator and foreword-writer; for further information see the publisher's website: [www.telos.co.uk](http://www.telos.co.uk); it is the second in a series of new "Doctor Who" novellas, the first of which [Time and Relative by Kim Newman] we didn't see – although it was reviewed by Paul Beardsley in *Interzone* 175.) 23rd March 2002.

Stover, Leon. **Science Fiction from Wells to Heinlein.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1219-4, 190pp, hardcover, \$45 [USA], £42.75 [UK]. (Illustrated critical study of older sf, first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in the UK from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; it includes chapter titles such as "The British Tradition," "Verne and Wells," "John Campbell" and "Robert Heinlein," and at first sight it's an interesting-looking volume – large-format, well illustrated, and attractive in feel; however, judging from the first couple of chapters, it's also ill-written, slipshod in its facts, and tendentious; a major disappointment.) In the USA, March 2002; in the UK, May 2002.

Straub, Peter. **Magic Terror [7 Tales].** Harper-Collins, ISBN 0-00-710991-1, 401pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 2000; these "7 Tales," as the April 2002

subtle has it, first appeared not in magazines but in generic anthologies of original stories, such as *Black Thom, White Rose, The Mists from Beyond, Murder for Halloween and Borderlands* 4.) 4th March 2002.

Sutherland, David. **A Black Hole in Neasden.** Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-99440-3, 343pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous juvenile sf novel, first edition; we're not told anything about the author, but this is possibly a debut novel by a new British writer – a sort of junior Robert Rankin?) 15th March 2002.

Thomsen, Brian M., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Oceans of Space.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0063-5, 315pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 16 all-original spacefaring stories by Bill Fawcett, Ron Goulart, Roland Green, Ed Greenwood, Simon Hawke, Andre Norton, Jody Lynn Nye, Dennis O'Neil, Mike Resnick and others; it's one of a long, long series of "pulp" anthologies produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books, which includes such earlier titles as *Oceans of Magic* [2001; also co-edited with Thomsen].) March 2002.

Turtledove, Harry. **Rulers of the Darkness.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30036-2, 576pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received, follow-up to *Into the Darkness* [1999] and *Darkness Descending* [2000] and *Through the Darkness* [2001] in the ongoing series about a world war "in a world where magic works.") April 2002.

Vance, Jack. **Lyonesse: Suldrun's Garden.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 27." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07374-8, xi+436pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; the first volume in Vance's "Lyonesse" trilogy, set in the legendary drowned realm off Cornwall and Brittany.) 14th March 2002.

VanderMeer, Jeff. **City of Saints and Madmen: The Book of Ambergris.** Introduction by Michael Moorcock. Cosmos Books [PO Box 45,

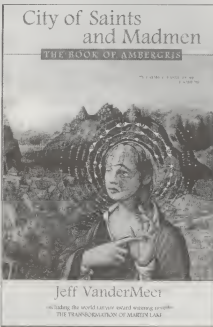
Gilllette, NJ 07933-0045, USA], ISBN 1-58715-436-6, 220pp, trade paperback, cover by Scott Eagle, \$15 [USA], £12 [UK]. (Fantasy collection, first edition; it includes four novellas which have already appeared separately as slim small-press volumes or in anthologies: *Dradin, in Love* [1996], *The Early History of Ambergris* [1999], the World Fantasy Award-winning "The Transformation of Martin Lake" [1999] and "The Strange Case of X" [1999]; it comes with cover commendations from China Miéville, S. P. Somtow, Terri Windling and others; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher, and this must be one of their most handsome titles to date; to order, see the publisher's website: [www.cosmos-books.com](http://www.cosmos-books.com).) Late entry 2001 publication, received in February 2002.

Westfahl, Gary, and George Slusser, eds. **Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 97." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-32064-0, vii+182pp, hardcover, £53.95. (Collection of essays on sf and its position within literature, first published in the USA, 2002; available in the UK from Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LL; it contains 14 essays, many of them probably first delivered as academic conference papers [although that is not indicated], by Stephen P. Brown, Arthur B. Evans, Howard V. Hendrix, Edward James, the late Frank McConnell, Farah Mendlesohn, Joseph D. Miller, Tom Shippey and other writers; recommended, as are all volumes written or edited by our prolific academic friend and *Interzone* columnist, G. Westfahl.) February 2002.

Wolfe, Gene. **Return to the Whorl: Volume Three of The Book of the Short Sun.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87364-6, 412pp, trade paperback, cover by Jim Burns, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the final part of a major trilogy which is itself a follow-up to Wolfe's tetralogy "The Book of the Long Sun" [1993-1996]; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 167.) 14th March 2002.

Wright, John C. **The Golden Age: A Romance of the Far Future.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-84870-6, 336pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new American writer; it's described as "grand space opera, a large-scale of adventure novel in the tradition of A. E. van Vogt and Roger Zelazny [with perhaps a bit of Cordwainer Smith enriching the style].") April 2002.

Zettel, Sarah. **A Sorcerer's Treason.** "A Novel of Isavalta." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87441-3, 523pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; another Big Commercial Fantasy, being touted as the "spectacular debut by a major new epic fantasy talent," it is in fact by an author who has previously written four sf novels, including *Reclamation* [1996], winner of a *Locus* Best First Novel Award, and *Fool's War* [1997], which was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award as best paperback original of its year.) April 2002.



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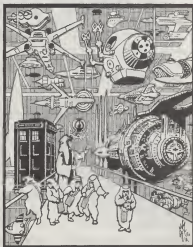
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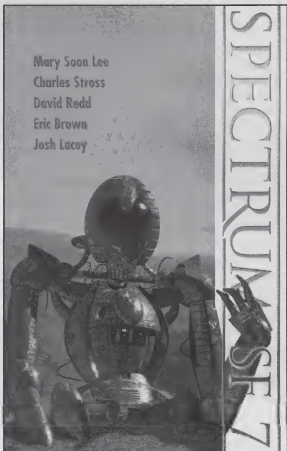
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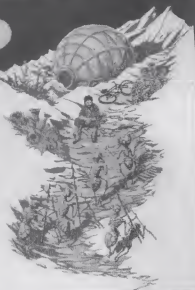
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